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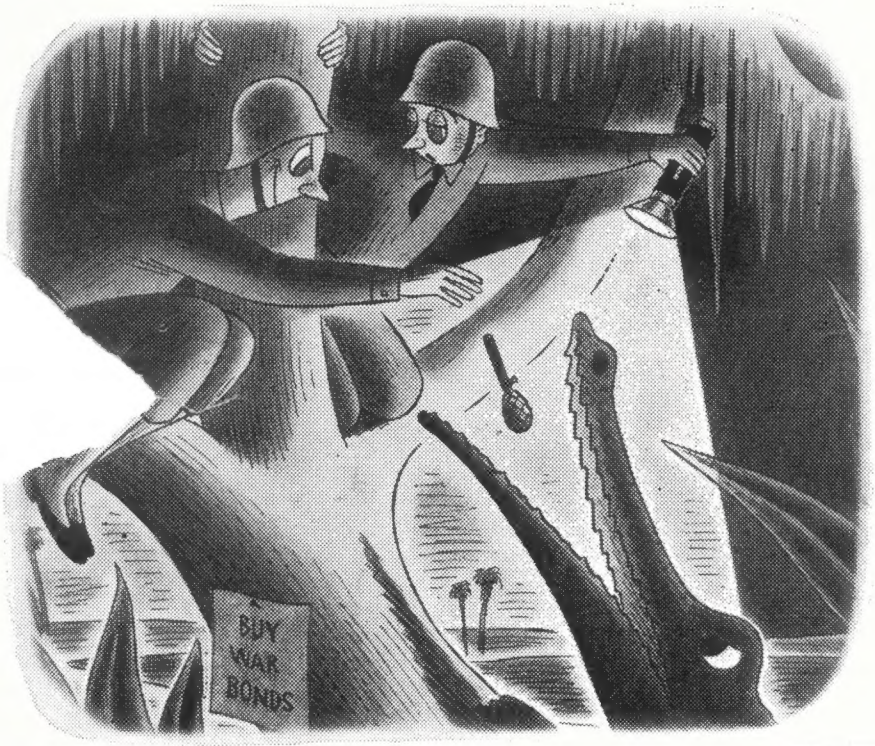

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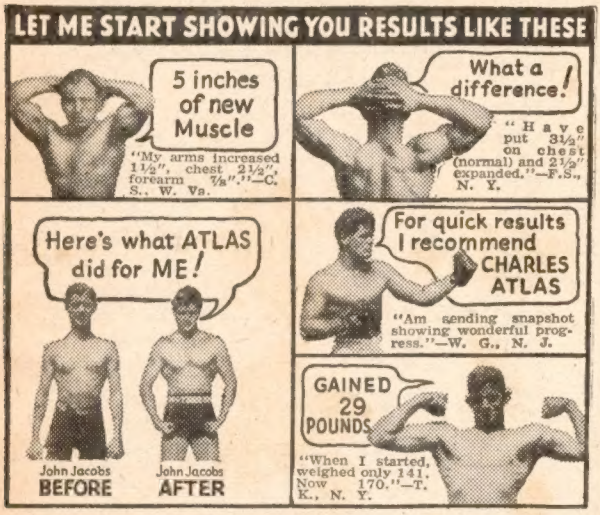
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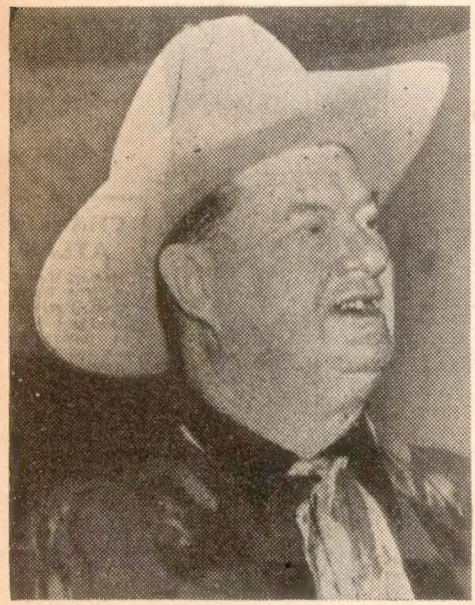

FOGHORN CLANCY

To me there is always more or less thrill in going into any country or section where I have never been before. Even in these modern times, there is a certain amount of thrill to be had in going over a new highway, and there must have been plenty of thrill for the pioneers going westward over new trails, into a new country, into a land where they knew adventure, danger and romance awaited them.

Most of them believed that a fortune also awaited them, because that was the thing that spurred them on, that hope in some manner to wrest a fortune from the new country. It was this hope for riches that kept many of them going on forward when the hardships and dangers already encountered made it seem wisest to turn back.

Gold and Land

It was the hope of finding gold that caused the great hordes of men to traverse what was then a wilderness to reach California in '49. It was land that caused many to go West, land that they knew would some day be valuable. "Land!" was the cry of the '89'ers in the opening of Oklahoma, when thousands lined up along the boundary with every kind of rig or conveyance imaginable, waiting for the signal that would send them racing headlong after land in one of the greatest land rushes ever known.

It was land and cattle that attracted the pioneers to what is now the great state of Texas, and all those pioneers found a rough country, too rough for weaklings, because taming the west was a job for strong men, men strong in will power and determination, men willing to fight for what they got, and then fight again to keep it.

Let the word spread that there was free land anywhere, or that gold had been discovered and there would be a regular stampede of people on the way to the new country or the new gold fields, and it was surprising even in those days of slow transportation, and even before the telegraph, how news of a new country or gold discovery spread so quickly.

Human Stampedes

Even after the country was pretty well settled and gold rushes were practically a thing of the past, there were new oil fields discovered, and the rush to each new oil

(Continued on page 10)

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TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 8)

field was what might be termed a stampede of humanity. Men rushed in, some of whom of course knew what it was all about and had their plans pretty well made, while others just rushed in blindly with no thought of what they were going to do. They seemed just to follow the crowd.

But in any kind of a boom, any boomtown drew its share of undesirables, of bad men, gunmen and those of the lawless element. They came knowing that wherever there were crowds there was an opportunity to take advantage of the weaker ones and wrest from them something in the nature of wealth.

It is strange how the stories of those who made rich strikes in gold or oil is more often told than the stories of those who made failures, and it is those stories of men who got rich quick that have kept other men forever on the lookout, always trying, always hoping.

There are stories of prospectors who for years eked out barely an existence, who were grubstaked time and time again, who became such failures that they were laughed at and called crazy and then struck it rich and then those who had laughed said they were smart and proclaimed such prospectors to be men of great foresight and determination.

The Quest for Black Gold

It was and still is the same in the oil business. There were men who drilled dry holes until they were bankrupt, drilled when they had to borrow the money with which to pay the drillers and tool dressers, men who spent every dime they could scrape together believing and hoping that oil was underneath a certain tract of land, drilled and slaved in their quest for the black gold until they too were looked upon as being mentally unbalanced.

Some continued the quest to the end and even died without ever having struck oil, others, when it looked as though they could go no further, brought in gushers, opened new oil pools or fields and became wealthy and influential very quickly.

There is a story of a man who believed he was destined to become an oilionaire. He kept trying under the most adverse circumstances, kept trying when any but those of the greatest determination would have quit. When people laughed at his failures it seemed to make him all the more deter-

(Continued on page 12)

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TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 10)

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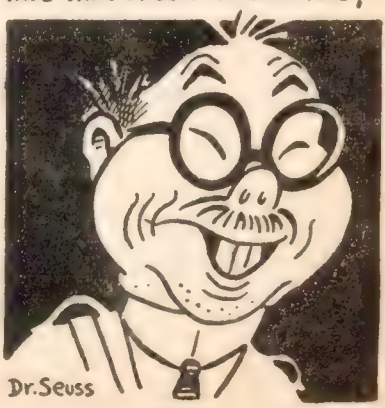
Then Bob Galbreath decided that he was perhaps drilling in the wrong territory. He shifted his operations to about twelve miles south of Red Fork, in what was then con-

(Continued on page 107)

WIPE THAT SNEER OFF HIS FACE!



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"Get your arms up!" Betty challenged. "I've got you covered!" (CHAPTER XII)

CHAPTER I

$5,000 Reward

FACETIOUS miners named the lofty redwood tree the "World's Largest Bulletin Board," for the reason that California lawmen had utilized it, since the days of '49, as a spot to nail up Vigilante notices, reward posters, and similar placards.

It was not a large specimen, as redwoods went in the Wawona section of the Sierra Nevadas, being only some thirty feet in circumference at the butt. And a prehistoric lightning bolt had burned out the heart of the bole so that riders and mule strings, packing bullion out of the gold camp at Placer Bar, could ride through the fissure in the trunk.

Situated on the rim-rock of Roaring River's south bank, the Bulletin Board Tree marked the junction of trails branching out to Hornitas and Mariposa to the south, Big Oak Flat and Placerville to the north, and—the trail which was straddled by the redwood's fire-scarred trunk—the roaring boom camp five miles up the river canyon, Placer Bar.

For two generations, Mother Lode sheriffs had tacked reward posters to the thick, fibrous bark. Back in the

'fifties Joaquin Murietta and "Three-Finger Jack" had reined up before the redwood to fire their six-shooters at blazers offering a reward for their capture.

Pony Express riders, headed for Sacramento and San Francisco with their *mochilas* bulging with overland mail, had hurtled through the cleft tree in '61.

There was a saying in the El Dorado country that if you camped long enough at Bulletin Board Tree, you would meet every gold-hunter, gambler, desperado and adventurer who was lured to California's gold fields.

Two riders, trailing pack horses, were heading at a leisurely pace up the Placer Bar trail on this balmy summer afternoon, bound for the heart of the Sierra Nevadas. They came from the direction of Sonora and Ruby Crater, and no traveler, meeting them on the trail now, would have guessed that Vigilante posses were still combing the northern reaches of the Mother Lode in search of them.

WAYNE MORGAN, mounted on a deep-brisketed roan cow pony, was oddly out of place against the mountain background, for he wore the batwing chaps, cleft-crown Stetson and spurred mule-ear boots of a buckaroo from, say, Texas or Wyoming.

Trailing the roan without benefit of hackamore rope was a magnificent black stallion, carrying Morgan's warsack and bedroll.

The cowboy's saddle partner was a Yaqui Indian, dressed in a white cotton shirt and buff drill trousers, his feet encased in pliable deerskin moccasins. A single eagle feather jutted from his coal-black, braided hair, held in place by a scarlet bandeau. The puma-muscled red man rode a wiry gray horse, while his pack mare was paint. This pinto served for a saddle mount when the Yaqui was not riding the gray.

"The Bulletin Board Tree, Hawk!" commented Wayne Morgan, cuffing back his gray Stetson and scanning the dozens of overlapping reward posters which had been nailed like shingles around the circumference of the sequoia tree. "The last time we was here, remember, we had no time to rubberneck. If I remember right, a sheriff from Jimtown was breathin' down our necks, with a couple of hang-ropes hangin' over his pommel."

Blue Hawk, the Yaqui, reined up alongside his partner's stirrup, his flint-black eyes flashing humorously in recollection of the last time they had galloped up this trail.

"You remember w e l l, Senor," chuckled the Indian. "But you have another reason for stopping here this morning, no?"

Morgan nodded, his blue-gray eyes slitting as they searched the array of posters. In his early thirties, Morgan sat his saddle as if he had been born in the cantleboard. His bronzed hands never strayed far from the staghorn butts of the Colt .45 six-guns which reposed in thonged-down holsters at his thighs.

"It is well we did tarry here, before ridin' into Placer Bar this evenin', Hawk," he commented. "Looks like the hombre that's been hangin' around here callin' hisself the Masked Rider and we had to sashay over here to see about, has been plumb busy. See yonder."

The Indian followed the direction of Morgan's pointing arm.

Tacked above the V-shaped notch in the split redwood was a big cardboard poster which gleamed white as

Smashed back with slugs in their chests, the two gunmen reeled over the cliff's brink (CHAPTER I)

bone against the weather-yellowed placards around it.

Sun rays, shafting down through the conifers which timbered Roaring River Canyon, glinted blindingly off the heads of nails which held the poster—proof that they had been driven there but a short time before. The night dews had not yet rusted the nails.

The faces of the two riders sobered as they read the latest poster to be nailed to the redwood:

$5,000 REWARD

for the capture, alive, of the outlaw who is called

THE MASKED RIDER

will be paid by the undersigned. Rides a coal-black stallion named Midnight. Dresses in a black cape, a black Stetson, and wears a black domino mask. Travels with a Yaqui Indian named Blue Hawk, who has been educated in mission schools, and is a dead shot with a firearm or bow and arrow. Wanted dead or alive. Believed to be in El Dorado country, headed for Nevada.

JAMES ENDICOTT,
Sheriff,
Calaveras County,
California.

"You are right, Senor," grunted Blue Hawk, gathering up his reins. "We need provisions. It is best that I hole up in the brush, Senor, while you ride on to Placer Gap in your Wayne Morgan disguise. The law at the mining camp will not guess you

are the real famous Robin Hood outlaw this sheriff thinks this other man to be and calls the Masked Rider."

MORGAN grinned boyishly as he reined his roan saddler through the cleft redwood. During the years he and the Yaqui had ridden the owlhoot trail, no man had ever discovered the dual identity of Wayne Morgan and the celebrated Masked Rider. Only when playing the rôle of the West's Robin Hood fugitive, did Wayne Morgan don the black mask and Stetson and cloak by which evil-doers knew the vengeance rider.

"As long as someone calling himself the Masked Rider has been in this country, even though now we know he has hightailed," Morgan agreed, "it would be dangerous for us to be seen riding together into this mining camp or—"

The Robin Hood outlaw reined up sharply as a high-pitched scream came to his ears, from somewhere dead ahead on the canyon rim trail. Even as he dropped a hand to gun-butt, Wayne Morgan saw a rider hurtle into view around a bend of the trail, fifty yards east of the Bulletin Board Tree.

The rider was bent low over the saddle-horn and quirting a galloping sorrel pony for extra speed. An instant later the rumble of hoofbeats was drowned out by the roar of a heavy-calibered rifle. Morgan and Blue Hawk saw the sorrel pony go down in mid-stride, tunneled by a .30-30 slug.

Catapulted from stirrups, the rider flew through space to land in a dense bed of ferns by the trailside, the slain horse crashing off into the canyon and hurtling fifty feet to the boiling rapids of the river below.

Spurring swiftly into the undergrowth alongside the trail, Wayne Morgan was leaping from saddle even as three burly riders charged into view and halted their rearing ponies alongside the ferns where the rider had fallen.

Another scream came from the unhorsed rider then, just as Blue Hawk was leading his two ponies into the brush. The two partners of the owlhoot exchanged dumfounded glances, as they realized that the rider was a girl!

Peering through the screen of jungle-thick growth, Morgan and Blue Hawk saw the three whiskery-faced riders swing out of stirrups and pounce upon the girl, even as she scrambled to her feet. Then, for the first time, the hidden outlaws saw that the girl's pursuers wore bandannas tied over their faces.

With feverish haste, Wayne Morgan unbuckled his saddle-bags and removed therefrom his black Stetson and cloak.

"Keep under cover with the hosses, Hawk!" he ordered, swiftly donning his domino mask. "Three roughs holdin' up a lone girl—it don't stack up so good. I aim to see what's goin' on out there."

With practiced skill, Wayne Morgan transformed himself into the mysterious Masked Rider, while Blue Hawk kept watch of what was transpiring on the trail.

The girl was still struggling frantically, but she was being bound and gagged by her bandanna-masked assailants.

Whipping back his sable-hued cloak, the Masked Rider palmed a .45 Peacemaker, and slithered off through the manzanitas and sumac brush which paralleled the trail. But by the time he had reached the spot where the masked trio had shot the girl's horse from under her, the kidnap victim was securely tied up, her arms behind her back, a handkerchief knotted around her jaws to silence her cries.

"We're settin' purty, boys!" exulted one of the trio, rubbing his hands

together gleefully. "When Ed Channon finds out we've got his girl, he'll be glad to fork over that pay-roll *dinero*. When we got the money, we'll cash in her chips and—"

THE outlaw broke off with a startled oath, as he heard a crashing sound in the brush behind him. Whirling, the kidnaper froze in a posture of horror as he saw a black-clad apparition stalk out of the fern brake, behind a pair of jutting Colts.

"Elevate, hombres!" drawled the Masked Rider. "Pronto!"

The two mackinaw-coated ruffians who were in the act of hoisting the girl aboard one of the horses spun about, releasing their grip on the prisoner's arms.

"It's—it's the Masked Rider, Chief!" groaned one of the masked men. "We got to shoot our way out of this or our fish is fried!"

Moving as one, the two outlaws dug for leather. Sun rays flashed on darting gunmetal, as the killers whipped their .45s to a level, aiming at the poised figure of the Masked Rider.

With a grim smile, the black-clad man tripped gunhammers. Flame spat from the bores of his Peacemakers. The river's thunder was drowned out by the deafening roar of the Masked Rider's lethal revolvers.

Smashed back with slugs in their chests, the two gunmen reeled into the trailside brush and pitched out of sight over the cliff's brink, to plunge to their dooms in the boiling white water fifty feet below.

Through whirling gunsmoke, the Masked Rider saw the remaining outlaw leap to put the girl between himself and the black-hatted gunman. With a bellow of terror, the surviving member of the kidnap trio vaulted into saddle and wheeled his pony about in the direction of Placer Bar.

Unable to shoot without endangering the tied-up girl, the Masked Rider charged forward as he saw the bandit roll his hooks. A dangling pine branch clawed at the outlaw's bandanna mask in that instant, and for a fleeting moment the Masked Rider caught sight of the whiskery-jowled, hate-contorted face behind the leader's mask. He saw a shoebrush-pompadoured, Germanic bullet-head.

Then the bandit was gone around the hairpin bend of the trail. The Masked Rider suppressed an oath of fury as he heard the swift rataplan of hoofbeats as the would-be kidnaper made his escape up the canyon trail.

CHAPTER II

The Girl from Placer Bar

THRUSTING his smoke-fuming Colts into holsters, the Masked Rider strode across the trail and reached up to remove the handkerchief gag from the girl's mouth. And as the cloth fell away, he looked down into a blanched white face which he knew would be beautiful under less trying circumstances.

The kidnap victim was hardly more than nineteen or twenty, with a wealth of wheat-gold hair and eyes as blue and lustrous as a mountain pool. She wore a miner's red flannel shirt and buckskin-foxed riding breeches tucked into taffy-brown boots. But even the masculine garb could not hide the full, supple curves of her lovely body.

Except for a turquoise-and-silver-handled skinning knife in a sheath at her belt, the girl was unarmed. Her slim hands were encased in fringed buckskin gauntlets, and in lieu of a hat she wore a blood-red rose in her hair.

"Thank you, sir," she panted, color glowing back into her face as she saw her benefactor remove the bowie knife from her scabbard and use the razor-

keen blade on the hemp rope with which the outlaws had bound her arms behind her. "You—you are the Masked Rider?"

As the girl's bonds fell in loops at her feet and the Robin Hood outlaw restored her knife to its case, the tall, domino-masked man nodded gravely.

"You have good ears." He laughed. "The two fiends who identified me, I fear, will not be able to congratulate their pardner on makin' his ecape. Yuh got any idea who them men were? They musta believed yuh'd know 'em, else they wouldn't have masked up."

The girl shook her head, busy peeling off her gloves to chafe her bruised wrists.

"No," she whispered, shuddering. "I—I was out taking my usual twilight ride out of Placer Bar, when they jumped me, back along the trail. They told me to throw up my hands and rein down. I—I decided to run for it."

Steel-shod hoofs grated on the trail behind them, and the Masked Rider whirled, hands going gunward. Then he relaxed, as he saw Blue Hawk striding toward them, with the four horses at his heels.

"My pardner," the Masked Rider reassured the girl. "Did yuh see the face of that hombre who escaped, when the pine limb brushed off his mask?"

She shook her head.

"No—I was staring at you," she confessed, and her laugh reminded the two outlaws of water rippling over a cascade. "But I should introduce myself. I am Betty Noonan. I teach school up at Placer Bar."

The Masked Rider walked over to inspect the two lather-flecked horses belonging to the kidnapers who had been bullet-dumped into Roaring River's chasm. The saddles bore no distinguishing marks, and the horses were unbranded.

"You're wondering why I was waylaid, Masked Rider," Betty Noonan said. "I think I can tell you."

THE Masked Rider waited for the young school-teacher to go on.

"I think it is because I am Ed Channon's fiancée," she said confidently. "You see, Ed is the pay-roll clerk for the big Eagle Mining Syndicate. He handles large amounts of money, to pay off the Syndicate miners. I think those three ruffians wanted to hold me for ransom, believing that Ed might be tempted to hand over the monthly pay-roll to them to redeem my life."

The Masked Rider rubbed his smooth-shaven jaw thoughtfully.

"The sun will be settin' in another hour," he said. "I don't think it would be wise for yuh to borrow one of these horses and ride back to the minin' camp alone, Miss Noonan. Not with that lobo at large. He might try to capture yuh on yore way back."

Betty Noonan tugged on her gauntlets and flashed a smile at the stolid-faced Blue Hawk.

"I understand," she said. "You want to escort me safely home—but you wouldn't dare enter Placer Bar until after dark. Is that it?"

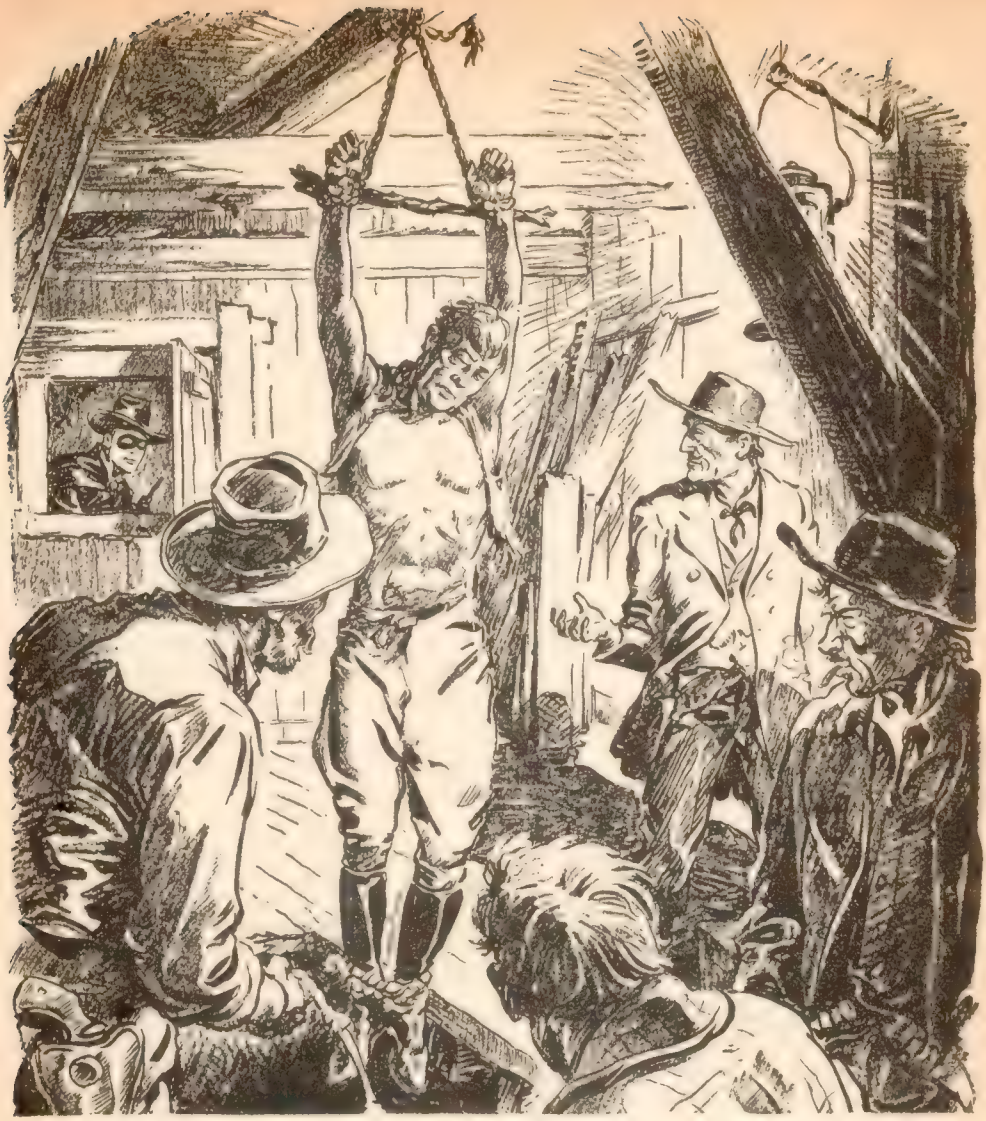
The Masked Rider nodded.

"If yuh don't feel nervous about waitin' here with us—" he began apologetically.

Betty Noonan's eyes sparkled with merriment.

"I think it would be romantic to visit with the West's most famous—gentleman desperado," she said. "I am sure Mr. Channon would want me to accept your kind offer of protection."

Withdrawing to a shadowy glade out of sight of the miner's trail, the three settled down to wait for dusk. But the comely school-ma'am made no attempt to question her benefactors. They, in turn, maintained a tight-lipped silence regarding their reasons for being in the gold country.



Chahnon was hanging by his wrists over the shaft (CHAPTER XIII)

Night fell swiftly in the tall timber, and the girl saw the two oddly-contrasting outlaws strip saddles from their mounts and stake out the roan and the pinto. Then the Masked Rider saddled Midnight, his coal-black stallion, while Blue Hawk rigged his gray.

Sheltered by the pitch darkness, the three made their way back to the Roaring River trail. Betty Noonan, mounted on one of the slain outlaw's horses, spurred into the lead to guide her rescuers along the zigzagging trail.

Four miles to the eastward, a turn in the canyon revealed the clustering lights of the boom camp. Saloon windows were ablaze with light along the main street, which followed the river bank along the pit of the gulch. Higher up the pine-hung slopes, lights glowed in the windows of miners' shacks.

To the right of the trail as they rode into the outskirts of Placer Bar, the smoke stacks and rough outlines of mine shaft-houses were sharp-etched against the starry sky.

"These buildings are the smelters

and stamp mills of the Eagle Syndicate," Betty Noonan explained to the riders who flanked her either stirrup. "My fiancé is in the syndicate office. I will stop there, and Ed can take me down to the boarding house where I live during the school term."

The three dismounted in the clot of shadows below the Eagle Mining Syndicate's big reduction mill. Its noisy stamping machinery was stilled, following a day's work of pounding the gold-bearing ore which miners grubbed from the rich Mother Lode hills surrounding the mining settlement.

"You needn't fear Ed Channon will turn you in to the Regulators here in town, sir," Betty Noonan said, as she swung gracefully out of stirrups. "Won't you come in—and let my future husband thank you personally?"

FOR the first time since they had left their hideout, the Masked Rider's taut muscles relaxed. At any point along the Roaring River Trail, he had expected a gunshot to stab the darkness. It surprised him that the outlaw who had escaped the threat of his blazing .45s back at the Bulletin Board redwood tree had not lain in wait for Betty Noonan, knowing she would be returning home sooner or later by the only trail leading to Placer Bar.

"Yeah, we would be glad to meet the lucky man," the Masked Rider told the girl, hardly knowing why he made his decision. "Make shore, though, that Channon is alone in his office. He might have visitors who know of the bounty Blue Hawk and I are packin' on our topknots."

The Masked Rider spoke facetiously, but already Blue Hawk had stolen up to the lighted office window and was peering inside.

A tall, strikingly handsome young clerk was busy at a desk inside. And, seated in a chair near the door, was a gray-whiskered man with a toothpick waggling from his lips. He was engaged in conversation with Ed Channon.

Stepping up beside Blue Hawk, Betty Noonan glanced inside the syndicate office and smiled reassuringly.

"That other man is Ed's best friend, Gus Asplund," she whispered. "He's the salt of the earth—a stampmill engineer here at the plant. You won't have to worry about him."

A moment later Betty Noonan was stepping into the office, with the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk at her heels.

"Betty!" cried the young pay-roll clerk, springing up with a glad smile illuminating his clean-cut, rugged features. "I've been worried about you staying out so long. You—"

Ed Channon's face bleached of color and his hand stabbed toward a six-gun holstered at his thigh as he caught sight of his fiancée's companions. Gus Asplund bounced out of his chair and hurled his arms aloft, as he stared at the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk. Unarmed, the stampmill engineer was taking no chances.

"These men saved my life down by the Bulletin Board Tree this afternoon, darling," Betty Noonan said, laughing. "Put away that gun. When you hear what they did for me—"

Ed Channon's face dripped sweat. He held his six-gun half out of holster, his face twitching with mixed emotions.

"But that's the Masked Rider—and his Injun pard!" croaked the pay-roll clerk. "Marshal Pederson and the town Regulators have been warned to watch out for them!"

The mixed fear and concern vanished from Ed Channon's face, as his fiancée briefly outlined the circumstances of her near kidnaping, and the providential appearance of the Masked Rider.

"Tomorrow we can scout along the river and try to identify the two dead men," the girl concluded. "My at-

tackers could be any one of a hundred lawless men here in Placer Bar, Ed. And one of them is still at large. I'm sure they had their eye on the pay-roll currency you keep in the Syndicate safe yonder."

Crossing to the window and pulling down a green shade to make sure no passerby caught sight of his guests, Ed Channon turned to pump the hands of the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk. Not until then did the engineer, Gus Asplund, lower his arms.

IGNORING the pay-roll clerk's stammering words of gratitude, the Masked Rider jerked a thumb toward the small iron safe behind Channon's desk, marked in gold letters,

EAGLE MINING SYNDICATE.

"Miss Noonan says yore pay-roll dinero is in greenbacks," the Robin Hood outlaw said bluntly. "How long will that money be kept in that sardine can yuh call a safe, Mr. Channon?"

For an instant, suspicious lights kindled in the pay-roll clerk's eyes, as his brain quested for the motive back of the Masked Rider's question. Then he flushed guiltily.

"Payday is a week from tomorrow," he said. "Why do you ask?"

The eyes behind the domino mask hardened.

"If that pay-roll money was back of Miss Noonan's attempted kidnapin' this afternoon," the Masked Rider pointed out seriously, "another and straighter try may be made to get it, Channon. If I was you I'd take precautions against havin' that safe blown open one of these nights by some El Dorado burglar."

Channon, one arm encircling his future bride as if he never wanted her to leave his presence again, scowled uncertainly.

"What would you suggest, Masked Rider?"

The Robin Hood outlaw's eyes ranged across the room to where several cases of dynamite and blasting powder were stored.

"I'd fill the extra space in that safe with dynamite," he said, "and hang a label beside the combination dial informin' a would-be safecracker what yuh've done. He might think yuh was bluffin'—but if he *did* blow open the safe, he'd probably get killed tryin' it. And at least the payroll money wouldn't fall into his hands. It would be blown to shreds."

A grin broke over the young clerk's face.

"I'll do just that," he said impulsively. "You see, safes have to be toted into these mountains on mule-back, so we couldn't get a decent-sized vault for storing the Syndicate's funds."

Gus Asplund, in the background, cleared his throat.

"Reckon I'll be moseyin' along to supper, Ed," the engineer said. "I'm shore proud to have met yuh, Masked Rider. And yore Injun pard. We think a heap of Miss Betty here in Placer Bar, and we won't be soon forgettin' what yuh done for her today."

Asplund shook hands with the two outlaws and, tipping his shapeless hat to Betty Noonan, slipped out into the night.

Once away from the Eagle Syndicate buildings, Asplund broke into a run. Reaching the main street of the mining camp, he lumbered his way to a side street and followed it up the south slope of the gulch until he came to the red brick jailhouse. There the mining camp marshal, Russ Pederson, maintained the headquarters of the Placer Bar Regulators.

The Syndicate engine boss was panting with exertion as he rapped on the jailhouse door. It was opened by the beefy-shouldered, onion-bald tin-star, Marshal Pederson.

"Rustle the Regulators together in a hurry, Marshal!" gasped Asplund

breathlessly. "If yuh get over to Channon's office before they leave, yuh'll be able to dab yore loop on the Masked Rider and his redskin pardner, Blue Hawk!"

CHAPTER III

"We Want the Masked Rider!"

RUSS PEDERSON made a spluttering sound which indicated that Asplund's news had caused him to swallow his cud of tobacco.

"The heck yuh say, Gus!" ejaculated the Regulator chief. "Yuh must be tight or loco—"

Asplund crowded into the jail office, his hands trembling with excitement.

"It's the truth, I tell yuh!" protested the engineer. "I just come from there. The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk, palaverin' with Ed Channon. They may leave town ary minute!"

Pederson sniffed Asplund's breath, detected no whisky on it, then tugged at his sandy waterfall mustache dubiously.

"Why in the name of blazes," he demanded, "would a man like Ed Channon be pow-wowin' with the Masked Rider? If this is one of yore practical jokes, Gus Asplund, I'll wring yore turkey neck for yuh!"

Asplund grabbed the lawman's sleeves frantically.

"I ain't jokin'!" he pleaded. "Surround the Eagle office with enough Regulators, Pederson, and yuh'll capture them bandits alive. There's a five-thousand buck reward on the Masked Rider's scalp, and it'll be payable to me if I'm tellin' yuh the truth, won't it?"

Convinced of Asplund's sincerity, Russ Pederson jerked a ring of keys from his levis pocket and unlocked a gun locker on the office wall.

"Get goin', Gus!" rasped the marshal. "Spread the word, but don't let the saloon riffraff find out what's in the wind. Fetch fifteen, twenty-odd Regulators up here, and I'll pass out shotguns enough to go around. And rattle yore hocks, yuh spavined little donkey-engine nurse!"

In an incredibly short time, Gus Asplund returned to the hillside jail, with thirteen members of the town Regulators with him—burly, rock-eyed men, owners of mines and saloons and other business enterprises. They had banded together to maintain law and order in the settlement, under the leadership of their hard-riding, straight-shooting marshal, Russ Pederson.

"We'll throw a cordon around Channon's office shack, men." Pederson gave his battle orders, as he passed out double-barreled buckshot guns to the excited Regulators. "Kill the Injun if he makes a break for it, but don't forget I want the Masked Rider alive. Wounded, mebbe, but in good enough shape to qualify for the reward he's packin'."

Like a file of ghosts, Pederson and his scattergun-toting Regulators, accompanied by Gus Asplund, hurried through the night in the direction of the Eagle stampmills. They purposely avoided the main street below, so that the alarm would not spread to the saloon element.

Moving swiftly to their appointed places, the Regulators flung a cordon around the frame shack which was Ed Channon's syndicate office. Then, palming his six-guns for action, Russ Pederson headed grimly for the door of Channon's office. Holstering one gun, Pederson reached for the doorknob, twisted it, found it locked.

GLANCING around, the mining camp marshal saw three horses ground-tied in a patch of bluestem grass, off at the edge of the timber

where the Roaring River trail entered the gulch. One of them, a coal-black stallion, was almost invisible in the starlight.

"That'll be the Masked Rider's bronc," thought Pederson. "He ain't flew the coop yet, then."

Reaching up, Pederson rapped the door panels sharply with the muzzle of his six-gun.

A bullet from one of the Masked Rider's .45s found the marshal's cheek (CHAPTER III)

From within came Ed Channon's startled voice, after a short delay.

"Who is it?"

Pederson braced his muscles grimly, thumb-earing his knurled gun-hammer to full cock.

"The Regulators. We want the Masked Rider, Ed!"

Pederson heard a girl's voice give a sharp, low cry inside Channon's office. Then, after a pause, Channon's voice again.

"Gus Asplund told you the Masked Rider was here, eh? The dirty scum!"

Pederson's heart tom-tommed in his ears.

"Open up, Channon, before we bash the door down. Yore visitors can't get away. The Regulators got the buildin' surrounded."

Pederson heard the pay-roll clerk's harsh breathing behind the door panels.

"They—they've gone, Marshal!" faltered Channon. "The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk vamoosed, five minutes ago. Nobody's in here but Betty and me."

Pederson kicked the door savagely with a hobnailed boot.

"Open up, cuss yuh, or I'll hold yuh as an accessory, Ed!" thundered the

marshal. "Yuh're goin' to have plenty explainin' to do about the Masked Rider visitin' yuh, as it is."

Inside the syndicate office, Betty Noonan, white-faced with anxiety, was unlocking a door in the rear of the shack. At her back was the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk, their jaws hard with determination as they saw Ed Channon exchanging comments with the law officer at the doorstep.

"In here!" whispered the girl, pointing to the dark interior of an adjoining room. "There's a conveyor belt that leads up to the ore reduction mill. You can climb the buckets and get up there. They won't have the mill surrounded."

The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk slipped past the trembling girl, their eyes probing the blackness as Betty Noonan shut and padlocked the door behind them.

Waiting for their eyes to accustom themselves to the darkness, the trapped men heard Ed Channon's quavering voice.

"All right, Marshall. I'll open up and let you see for yourself. I can explain why they were here."

Russ Pederson's boots thumped into the office, as the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk made out the dim outlines of a series of rusty iron conveyor buckets, which led up a boarded-in, sloping structure which led to the reduction mill running up the canyon slope.

The conveyor belt made an ideal ladder, and the two fugitives climbed from bucket to bucket, skinning their hands on sharp bits of gold ore. Behind them they heard the muffled yell of the mining camp marshal, addressing the cordon of Regulators surrounding the office shack:

"They ain't in here, men! Scatter an' pick up sign around the shafthouse and the stampmill. Their hosses are still outside—they must be hidin' somewheres close!"

WITH sweat raining from their pores, and their muscles aching with effort, the Masked Rider and his Yaqui partner scrambled from bucket to bucket of the conveyor belt. Above them they could see stars winking through cracks in the roof.

"Marshal!" came the strident yell of Gus Asplund. "They run a sandy on yuh! I got a hunch they're climbin' the conveyor belt incline! We got to surround the stampmill!"

With desperate haste, the Masked Rider leaped down from a conveyor bucket to land on the plank floor of the reduction plant. Blue Hawk fol-

lowed him out of the conveyor chute, his moccasined feet landing as noiselessly as a panther.

Groping their way through a maze of gigantic machinery, the outlaws threaded across the plant to where a door loomed gray against the dark interior. Men were yelling to each other on the mountainside beyond the stampmill walls, as they scrambled up toward the Syndicate mill.

Even as the Masked Rider reached the threshold of the open doorway, he saw the stocky-built figure of Gus Asplund scramble up to the stampmill entrance, starshine winking off a twin-bored shotgun from the Regulators' arsenal.

"There's only three doors to the stampmill, men!" bawled Asplund. "Guard them, and we got them skunks trapped. We can hold 'em all night and then—"

Asplund's voice trailed off as he heard a plank squeak under a treading foot, dead ahead.

Staring into the murky maw of the stampmill door, Asplund could see no sign of danger. The Masked Rider's black costume formed a perfect camouflage, and Blue Hawk, with his telltale white shirt, was remaining prudently inside.

Wok! A clubbing gun-barrel connected with Asplund's skull, and the traitorous engineer flopped insensible at the Masked Rider's feet. The Robin Hood outlaw snatched the shotgun from the reward hunter's limp fingers before it could rattle down the hillside to betray Asplund's fate.

"Come on, Hawk!" whispered the Masked Rider. "We got to reach our hosses!"

Straight down the steep canyon slope the two fugitives made their way, keeping to the shadows under the stampmill wall. Once they halted stockstill, while two grunting Regulators clawed their way past them, almost at arm's reach.

Then, breaking into the open, the two outlaws sprinted past Channon's office and raced up to their waiting horses.

"There they go, men!" screeched Marshall Russ Pederson, leaping out of the lamplight-flooded doorway where Ed Channon and Betty Noonan were standing. "They're givin' us the slip!"

A bullet from one of the Masked Rider's .45s fanned the marshal's cheek, causing him to drop flat on his face to prevent silhouetting himself against the lamplighted doorway.

The delay gave the two outlaws time to vault into saddles, and then they, with their extra horse that Betty Noonan had ridden galloping behind, were cometing into the protection of the pine forest. They were followed by a whistling blast of buckshot from Pederson's weapon—swarming leaden pellets which fell short of their targets, as Blue Hawk and the Masked Rider made their getaway.

CHAPTER IV

Box Canyon Trap

A FULL moon wheeled over the Sierra Nevada crags by the time the wanted men had returned to the hide-out where they had left their extra mounts, in the region of the redwood Bulletin Board Tree.

Behind them they could hear a distance-muted clatter of hoofs, the sound carrying far down the cliff-walled corridor of Roaring River's gorge.

"Half of Placer Bar is in saddle, tryin' to get a cut of the bounty we're packin', Hawk," rasped out the Masked Rider, as they tied on their packs aboard the roan and the pinto. "We'll have to get into the tall timber and keep movin' until daylight."

Out into the brilliant moonlight the pair spurred their way, leading their pack-horses and riding through the Bulletin Board Tree once more, this time bound westward.

Harsh lines of concern were etched on the Masked Rider's lean face, as he heard the sounds of pursuit increasing in volume behind them. He was thinking of the miles of canyon trail they had ahead of them, before a side gulch broke the Roaring River chasm to afford a means of escaping the canyon.

They had ridden hard and far since daylight, and their horses were beginning to falter under the strain. On the other hand, the Regulator posse pounding behind them were no doubt mounted on fresh horses.

The vertical walls of the canyon gave way to a slanting, hopper-shaped formation, so heavily overgrown with pines and manzanita undergrowth that travel on horseback would be impossible off the river trail itself. Across Roaring River, the canyon was gashed with numerous side gullies,

but the mountain torrent, bedded with fanglike rocks, would be too difficult to cross.

They had purposely avoided taking the Mariposa trail which forked out of the Roaring River defile at the Bulletin Board redwood, knowing from past experience that it was roof-steep and the chances were too great on being overtaken by the hard-riding Regulators.

The Mariposa trail likewise climbed above timberline, and on the steep switchbacks, unprotected by trees, they would have made prime targets for posse guns.

"If we can make it to where Muddy Creek enters the Roaring River, we're safe, Hawk!" the Masked Rider flung back over his shoulder. "We have a hundred square miles of big timber to hole up in, along the Muddy. We've got to make our head-start count, before those gold-camp buscaderos cut down our lead to where they can spot us!"

Rounding a sweeping curve of the rocky canyon, the Masked Rider flung up an arm to warn Blue Hawk, pounding along at his heels, to rain up. Dead ahead on the trail, plainly revealed in the moonlight, was a plodding string of mules, flanked by buckskin-clad guards on horseback.

The mules were laboring under diamond-hitched canvas packs, freighting supplies to the stores and saloons of Placer Bar. On the narrow trail, it would be impossible to pass the inbound mule train. And if the muleskinners caught a glimpse of the Masked Rider's costume, they would probably open fire without delay.

HASTILY back-tracking around the bend of the trail to prevent being seen by the oncoming freighters, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk held a hurried conference.

At their south was a sheer wall of granite, backed by inpenetrable forest. Behind them, a score or more of shotgun-armed Regulators were speeding up from Placer Bar, bent on gunning them from their saddles. And further travel to the west was impossible, without waiting for the mules to pass.

"We're trapped, as things stand now, Hawk!" bit out the Robin Hood outlaw. "We could abandon our hosses and climb up into the timber, but that would be plumb foolish, for once the Regulators spotted our ponies they could cut us off from the summit."

Blue Hawk pointed off to the northward, across the plunging torrent of Roaring River.

"There is a canyon, Senor," the Indian said gravely. "It is our only chance."

Of one accord, the two outlaws spurred their horses down the steep, rocky incline, toward the spot where lunar rainbows were playing in the foaming cascades at the foot of a long series of river rapids.

"We'll be lucky if we cross the river without our hosses bustin' a leg or two," groaned the Masked Rider. "But like yuh say, there's nothing else we can do."

A few moments later their mounts were plunging into hock-deep water, hoofs fighting for purchase on the slippery stones, the icy river sluicing at mill-race speed down the rapids. Foot by foot, the four horses lurched and all but fell, picked up their feet again and struggled on, buffeted by the churning waters and impeded by the sharp rocks under hoof.

In belly-deep water at mid-river, the Masked Rider heard his Indian partner cry out sharply above the thunderous cascading of the rapids. Hipping about in saddle, the Masked Rider peered upward through the flying spray, and his jaw hardened in dismay.

The Regulator riders from Placer Bar were pounding around the canyon trail overhead, and reining up as

they spotted their quarry braving the dangerous waters of Roaring River in the gorge below. Moonbeams glinted on shotgun barrels as the posse riders dismounted.

Flames stabbed from gun muzzles and buckshot sprayed the river, as Russ Pederson gave the order to fire on the sorely beset fugitives. But the Masked Rider's luck held, and a moment later he and his Indian companion were spurring up the north bank, heading for the welcome shadows of the cliff-walled canyon immediately ahead.

The startled muleteers with their string of freight-laden animals joined forces with the Regulators, just as the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk vanished into the maw of the canyon.

"They've sealed their own dooms, men!" Russ Pederson announced triumphantly. "That's Nugget Gulch, where the Masked Rider is goin'. It's only a half a mile long, and ends in a blind box. We got 'em trapped, *amigos!*"

Undaunted by the barricade of rushing waters which cut them off from the mouth of the blind canyon, Pederson and his Regulators scrambled on foot down the slope and started wading the treacherous current. They were joined by the enthusiastic mule-train guards, who saw a chance to enter an exciting manhunt and get their share of the reward posted for the famous Masked Rider's capture.

FORMING a living chain across Roaring River, the marshal and his husky Regulators succeeded in gaining the north bank. Drenched from head to foot, the posse assembled on the river's edge to check their shotgun cartridges and examine holstered six-guns.

Then, following Russ Pederson, they converged on the bottleneck entrance of Nugget Gulch. Somewhere up the brushy defile ahead, the Masked Rider and his Indian partner were riding deeper and deeper into a trap. Being strangers to this section of the Sierra Nevadas, they would discover their mistake too late. Nothing short of wings would enable them to scale the beetling granite walls of the canyon off-shoot.

"Now, we'll handle it thisaway, men!" Marshal Pederson said, when they were inside the shadowy throat of the box canyon. "The odds is around forty ag'in two, so we won't have to worry about them slippin' out of this trap. But the Masked Rider is a cagey one, and he'll be desprit."

Glancing around at the faces about him, Pederson grounded his shotgun butt and went on:

"We'll block the canyon from cliff to cliff. I want us to split up into three groups of around fifteen men each, and we'll cork up this gulch from wall to wall. By some miracle, them two owlhooters might slip between the first bunch of men, but

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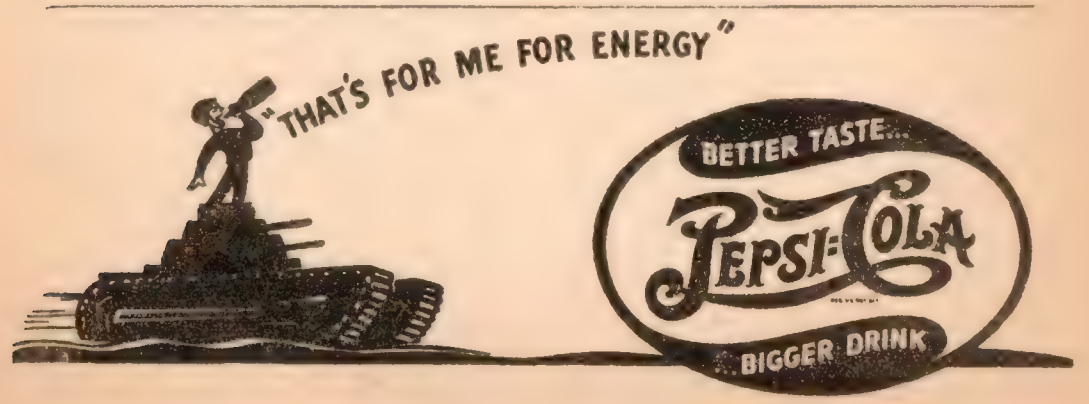


they'll have to face two other bunches. And it's impossible they could corkscrew their way through three walls of shotgun-totin' hombres."

Barking sharp orders, Russ Pederson headed off into the narrow, high-walled gulch, fanning out his Regulators so that every foot of the canyon width was covered. After penetrating fifty yards up the canyon, beating the brush as thoroughly as if they were hunting jackrabbits, the marshal yelled a signal to the second squad of man-hunters.

They, too, spread out in a phalanx, fine-tooth-combing the floor of the gulch. And they were followed, fifty yards behind, by an equally vigilant row of men, spanning the defile from cliff wall to cliff wall. Not even a field mouse could hope to filter through that triple wall of guards.

Meanwhile, fighting their way through brisket-deep brush, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk were pushing deeper into the converging end of the gulch, their eyes narrowing with growing dread as they scanned the steep granite walls for some ledge or side fissure which would carry them up to the timber.

Half an hour later, scratched and bleeding from the spiny chaparral they were breaking trail through, the fugitives drew rein, despair clawing at their hearts. This was trail's end.

Ahead of them, the brush petered out onto a sandy clearing, where prospectors had grubbed for gold in the gravelly canyon bed. And looming above them was an unscalable, hundred-foot wall of moon-gilded granite—the dead end of a box canyon.

"Out of the fryin' pan into the fire, Hawk," sighed the Masked Rider. "I don't doubt but what them minin' camp buskies crossed the river and are standin' guard at the mouth of this box canyon."

BLUE HAWK nodded gravely, his piercing eyes studying the rocky cul-de-sac, and admitting defeat. For the first time since he had joined up in his bizarre partnership with the Robin Hood outlaw, sharing perils and triumphs with the same stoic calm, the Yaqui realized that he and the Masked Rider faced an impasse.

"Our hosses are ganted to the breakin' point, Hawk," the Masked Rider said wearily. "Hold 'em here, and I'll go back and do some scoutin'."

Sliding out of stirrups, the black-cloaked outlaw vanished in the brush down-canyon. He has not gone two hundred yards before he realized that their peril was far worse than he had imagined. For not only had Russ Pederson led his Regulators across the river to post a guard over the box canyon's exit, but the daring marshal was leading his manhunters in for the kill!

Crouching in a madrone thicket, the Masked Rider saw a wall of men advancing slowly up through the moonlight, beating the brush with their shotgun muzzles, moving shoulder-to-shoulder toward the blind end of the canyon.

On they came, stolidly silent, as determined and irresistible as a tidal wave of doom. And from the sound of crackling brush in the rear of the marshal's phalanx, the Masked Rider knew that a similar line of Regulators was following in a second wave.

In moments of supreme peril, the Masked Rider's nerves were always at their coolest, his hair-trigger brain most fertile and keenly attuned. Now, with doom's slow march beating up the canyon before him, the Masked Rider sized up the odds and realized his chances of breaking out of this trap were nil.

From where he squatted in the underbrush he knew he could pick off one, two, a dozen men. But never in his outcast career had the Robin Hood outlaw shot a lawman pursuing his duty.

Never had the Masked Rider chosen the cowardly way out of a showdown, by shooting from ambush.

CHAPTER V

Moonlight Mystery

HURRYING back up the canyon to its end, the Robin Hood outlaw moved as silently as a stalking panther through the brush. Ten minutes later he was informing his Yaqui partner of the desperate set-up confronting them.

"There's a million-to-one chance we can outwit these posse men in spite of the odds, Hawk," the Masked Rider said. "Yuh'll lay yourself open to a coward's bullet, mebbe a hang-rope, if yuh agree to my plan. But otherwise, the two of us face capture before the hour is out. And that capture means death."

The Indian nodded bleakly in the moonlight.

"*Si.* What is your plan, Senor?"

As he outlined his daring scheme, the Masked Rider was busy removing his black cloak and domino mask. Replacing his soot-black Stetson for the rawhide-laced gray sombrero he carried in Midnight's *alforja* pouches, the Masked Rider once more stood before Blue Hawk transformed into his rôle of Wayne Morgan, rambling cowpuncher.

"Your scheme is *bueno,*" the Yaqui agreed softly. "Go. I remain here with the horses, Senor. *Valgame Dios.*"

Impulsively, Morgan reached out to grip his comrade's lean, copper-brown hand. Both men knew, but would not admit it through any flicker of facial expression, that this might be their last good-by.

"*Hasta la vista,* Hawk. And wish me luck."

Turning, Wayne Morgan skulked off down the canyon, moon rays gleaming off the conchas on his batwing chaps.

He kept going, straight in the direction of Marshal Pederson and his Regulators—one man against seemingly unsurmountable odds, gambling his destiny on his bold imagination and dauntless courage.

With infinite caution, Wayne Morgan worked his way down-canyon until he reached a spot where the cliff walls narrowed to less than twenty feet across. Broken talus boulders were piled thick at this point, the individual rocks overgrown with ignota brush and wild tobacco.

Squirming into the boulder pile, Morgan had a view of the moon-drenched corridor of Nugget Gulch, curving off and away toward the river.

He had reached the talus in the nick of time. Already Marshal Pederson and his gold camp possemen were beginning to work their way around the corner of the defile, shotguns held alert for emergency.

Pederson's low voice reached Morgan's ears. "The Masked Rider's prob'ly reached the box end of the canyon by now. Hazeltine — can yuh hear me, Hazeltine?"

One of the posse riders, the publisher of the *Placer Bar Mining News,* his fingers still sticky with the fresh printer's ink he had been feeding to his press when Gus Asplund reached his office with the news of the Masked Rider's presence in the gold camp, answered from the north side of the phalanx:

"Here, Marshal. What yuh want?"

The line of advancing men halted as Russ Pederson scanned the boulder pile ahead of them.

"We got to be careful we don't meet the Masked Rider and his Injun pard hightailin' back down the canyon, Hazeltine," Pederson called to the editor. "You and four-five men work yore way easylike into that talus yon-

der. From them rocks yuh can tell us if them owlhooters are in sight Yuh got a view clear to the end of the gulch from yore angle."

THE Regulators nearest Hazeltine bellied down on the rocks beside him and snaked their way cautiously into the talus pile, shoving rifles and shotguns ahead of them. Their eyes strained for the first glimpse around the bend of Nugget Gulch.

A few yards ahead in the boulders, Wayne Morgan withdrew into a wide cleft where a huge boulder, dropping from the rim-rock, had cracked in two. The moonlight did not penetrate the fissure, and the cowboy felt secure for the moment.

Foot by foot, the newspaper editor and the remaining Regulators crawled into the rocks, past Wayne Morgan's hiding place and on around the bend of the canyon. When they were ten feet beyond him, Wayne Morgan crawled out into the open on hands and knees and, drawing a six-gun, started inching his way along behind Hazeltine.

The moon cruised behind a fleecy cloud nest, and Morgan took his opportunity to crawl forward and join the Regulators who were stalking him. When the moon burst into the open sky again and flooded the canyon with argent light, Wayne Morgan was bellied down at Hazeltine's elbow, with a burly mule-skinner from the inbound mule train less than a yard on his other side!

Rearing to his knees, Hazeltine peered off up the canyon. Then, after a long moment's surveillance, the boom-camp editor hunkered down once more alongside Morgan.

"No trace of them owlhooters or their hosses, Marshal!" the newspaper man called back to the waiting Regulators. "It's all right to come on around the bend."

Crouching there amid the rocks, Hazeltine glanced around, staring absently at the cowboy gunman who had crawled into the talus heap with him. It was the most perilous moment Morgan faced, but he knew his scheme was working when he saw Hazeltine's gaze return up the canyon.

The posse which had swarmed out of Placer Bar on the trail of the Masked Rider had been composed of any man who had a horse handy for the chase. As a result, many of them were not Regulator Committee members, and would be strangers to Hazeltine. In addition, the posse had been increased by the muleteers who had met them on the Roaring River Trail.

For all Hazeltine knew—if he gave Morgan's presence at his elbow a second thought, which Morgan doubted — the cowboy stranger had been with the posse all along.

A few minutes later Russ Pederson, his marshal's badge glinting in the moonlight, had crawled up past Hazeltine and the advance guard, and was leading his Regulators on up the canyon. As the cliff walls narrowed, Wayne Morgan found himself rubbing shoulders with gold miners and muleskinners, who accepted his presence among them without question.

For half an hour the slow forward progress proceeded, as Pederson closed the jaws of the man-trap on the two outlaws he believed were caught at the blind end of Nugget Gulch. At length the marshal and his first body of Regulators were burrowing through the last barrier of brush before coming into view of the clearing at canyon's end.

Wayne Morgan purposely jockeyed himself to a position alongside the boom-camp marshal, when Russ Pederson parted the chaparral with his shotgun barrel and peered out toward the rocky cul-de-sac ahead.

FOUR horses were grouped under the cliff, and with them was a lone Indian, apparently unaware that the posse was closing in on him.

WAYNE MORGAN

Morgan breathed easier when he heard Pederson mutter at his side:

"That'll be Blue Hawk, and he ain't heeled. But where in tunket has the Masked Rider gone to?"

Search as he might the marshal saw no trace of the second outlaw. The cliff-boxed canyon end was devoid of vegetation, so that a man could not possibly be hiding anywhere around. But the Indian seemed to be alone.

"Elevate, Redskin!" the gold-camp marshal yelled suddenly, clicking the twin triggers of his buckshot gun to full cock. "Yuh're covered!"

Blue Hawk spun around to stare at the bulwark of brush from whence the order had come. Then his arms jerked aloft, and a look of well-feigned horror crossed the Yaqui's hatchet face.

At a signal from Pederson, the foremost Regulators charged out of the brush, spanning the canyon from wall to wall, their guns covering Blue Hawk from a dozen angles. Wayne Morgan was matching Pederson's stride as the marshal whipped out a pair of handcuffs and, charging Blue Hawk warily, snapped the fetters on the Indian's wrists.

In a trice the Regulators had circled the four horses, and were staring bewilderedly about in quest of the Masked Rider.

Jabbing his shotgun into Blue Hawk's ribs, Pederson demanded harshly:

"All right, Blue Hawk. We know the Masked Rider come up this canyon with yuh. Where's he hidin'?"

Blue Hawk's flinty eyes ranged over the hostile faces of the Regulators before him, passing over Wayne Morgan's face without a hint of recognition.

"*Quien sabe?*" returned the Indian. "He is not here. Perhaps he took wings like an eagle and flew out of this trap, no?"

A bead of sweat coasted down Pederson's blade-thin nose. Bewilderment creased the marshal's seamy face as he stared around the rock-walled trap, glancing up the cliffs as if he expected to see the black-cloaked rider scaling the granite scarp like a fly.

Heading through the ranks of his men, Pederson halted a few yards down the canyon and his lusty yell

bounded in echo down the rocky corridor:

"Come on up, men—and curry every bush and rock as yuh come! It's beginnin' to look like the Masked Rider's give us the slip, impossible as it seems!"

Within five minutes, the entire personnel of the Placer Bar posse was congregated in the dead end enclosure. They reported no clue as to the Masked Rider's whereabouts.

"This is the Masked Rider's hoss!" snarled Hazeltine, circling the big stallion. "Midnight, the reward posters call him. Marshal, this Injun knows where his pard is. Threaten to shoot him if he won't talk!"

Pederson turned angrily to the handcuffed Yaqui, and seemed on the

verge of carrying out the newspaperman's suggestion. Then he inhaled deeply and shook his head.

"Yuh don't know Injuns like I do, Hazeltine," groaned the lawman. "We could burn him alive and he wouldn't tell on his pardner. What galls me is that the Masked Rider could pull a sandy like this on forty-odd men."

AN excited cry from the editor drew the posse's attention to where Hazeltine was unbuckling Midnight's saddle-pockets. Out of the saddle-bags Hazeltine drew a black beaver Stetson, a domino mask with an elastic headband, and a thick cloak of black-dyed fabric.

"Here's the Masked Rider's clothes, Marshal!" cried the editor. "Yuh know what? That outlaw stripped off his disguise—and he must be among us this minute!"

Pederson and his Regulators made sharp outcries at this startling bit of news. Wayne Morgan saw the possemen staring at their neighbors, peering at moonlit faces, fingering gun butts nervously.

"Blamed if yuh ain't right, Hazeltine!" snarled the tinstar. "Without his black mask and cloak nobody knows what the Masked Rider looks like. But we'll plumb soon find out if he's among us. I got an idea—"

Bawling sharp orders, Pederson ranked the possemen into a long line, extending in a horseshoe shaped file around the dead end of the canyon. Then, like a sergeant inspecting soldiers, Pederson marched along the row of men, staring at each face in turn.

"I'm pickin' out the strangers in this bunch!" clipped the marshal. "Regulators from town, I know. And I know most of you mule freighters by sight. But the strangers, I want to step out of line where we can get a look at yuh."

One by one, Pederson selected four men from the posse whom he could not recall having seen at the diggings before. At the end of the line he picked out Wayne Morgan, who wore a complacent grin as he stepped out to join the quartet of strangers. .

Heading toward them, Morgan saw something which brought sweat dripping from his pores. For one of the men—a bullet-headed German, by his looks, with a black shoe-brush pompadour and a bull-thick neck—was Betty Noonan's escaped kidnaper!

There could be no mistaking the ugly, bent-nosed visage he had seen on the trail by the Bulletin Board Tree a few hours ago. The outlaw Betty Noonan believed was plotting the robbery of Ed Channon's payroll money had joined the gold-camp posse to hunt down the Masked Rider tonight! What was his game now?

CHAPTER VI

One-Man Horse

ONE glance at Blue Hawk told Wayne Morgan that the Indian, too, had recognized the escaped kidnaper in the ranks of the posse, for a flash of understanding passed between the handcuffed Yaqui and his partner.

In the surprise of his discovery, Wayne Morgan was barely conscious of Marshal Russ Pederson herding the five strangers into a line, and of the other Regulators breaking ranks to crowd about them.

"All right!" bellowed the lawman, planting himself wide-legged before the five strangers. "You gents introduce yoreselves and tell us who yuh are and what yuh're doin' in this posse. I got a hunch one of yuh is the Masked Rider!"

The first man on the left facing Pederson cleared his throat and croaked hoarsely:

"I'm Torvald Trondson, Marshal. I got a gold claim at the upper end of Roarin' River Canyon. Reckon I can prove that when we get back to Placer Bar."

Wayne Morgan saw the marshal wave Trondson aside and turn to the next stranger. For the second man was Betty Noonan's kidnaper.

"My name's Sam Eichner," the outlaw said gruffly. "I'm a prospector. Come up from Chinese Camp last week, and got a job at August Mangells' mine over on Granite Crick."

The marshal turned toward the massed Regulators about him.

"Mangells ain't in this posse, is he? So's he can identify this Sam Eichner jasper?"

Mangells was not present, the marshal was informed. Wayne Morgan found himself wondering if August Mangells was the name of one of Eichner's two kidnap partners who had died before the blazing guns of the Masked Rider a few hours before.

"Until you and Trondson identify yoreselves positive, yuh can consider yoreselves under arrest!" Pederson rasped at the German. "All right, we got three strangers left. Speak up."

The two possemen at Wayne Morgan's right gave their names as Tom Naselle and Fred Nemah, and claimed to be tinhorn gamblers working in various Placer Bar saloons.

"One left," Pederson said, turning to Wayne Morgan. "You ain't a miner, young feller, from the looks of them buckaroo duds. What's a cowboy doin' in my posse tonight?"

Morgan shrugged, feeling the wave of tension which swept through the nervous crowd of miners about him.

"My name's Wayne Morgan, sir. I'm from Nevada, or wherever I can find a spread to rent my lass'-rope."

"What yuh doin' in Californy?"

Morgan grinned disarmingly. "I was on my way to the Salinas country. Happened to be in Placer Bar tonight when I heard the town was organizin' a posse to chase the Masked Rider. So I forked my bronc and come along, Marshal. Any objections?"

Pederson shoved back his Stetson and scratched his bald head thoughtfully.

"No objections a-tall, cowboy. Unless I prove yuh're the Masked Rider. And I figger I got a way to find out if you or one of these other buskies are."

Excitement swept through the crowd as they saw Marshal Pederson stride past the five strangers who had to prove themselves innocent of suspicion of being the Masked Rider.

GOING over to where a muleskinner was holding the four horses belonging to the captured outlaws, the gold-camp lawman returned with the Masked Rider's magnificent black

stallion, Midnight.

"This here hoss," Pederson said, "is a one-man hoss. In other words, nobody but his owner — the Masked Rider—can ride Midnight. I got that information from sheriffs' circulars mailed to my office, and on that basis I aim to find out which of you gents —Trondson, Eichner, Naselle, Nemah, or Morgan—is the ringy skunk who's masqueradin' as one of us possemen."

Cold fingers of dread seized Wayne Morgan's heart at that moment. Pederson's information had been correct. Midnight was indeed a one-man stallion. Even Blue Hawk could not ride the magnificent black, unless the Masked Rider ordered Midnight to be docile under the Yaqui's reining.

Flicking a glance at the handcuffed Yaqui, Morgan saw despair kindling in his partner's eyes. Blue Hawk realized that the Masked Rider's desperate plan was about to boomerang, and bring about their doom.

It had been Wayne Morgan's original idea to join the Regulators and help capture Blue Hawk, who had been coached to put up no resistance when the show-down came. Then Morgan had figured that the gold camp miners would figure that the Masked Rider had somehow escaped the trap, and they would head back to Placer Bar with their Indian prisoner.

Morgan figured on rescuing Blue Hawk from Pederson's jail, by some method. But now it seemed that the wily marshal had outwitted him. Knowing that Midnight was a one-man horse, Pederson had struck on an idea which would prove the Masked Rider's identity beyond the shadow of a doubt.

"By jingoes, we got to hand it to yuh, Russ!" ejaculated Hazeltine, the editor. "Have yore guns ready, boys, in case one of these five strangers tries to shoot out of this trap."

Grinning jubilantly, Russ Pederson turned to Morgan.

"Yuh're dressed for ridin', Morgan!" snapped the officer. "Suppose you straddle Midnight first."

Heart beating like a trip-hammer, Wayne Morgan advanced toward his black stallion, approaching from the rear so that the magnificent animal would not nuzzle his shoulder affectionately.

"Stand back, men!" ordered Pederson. "Just in case Midnight does some plain and fancy buckin'."

Gripping reins and saddle-horn, Wayne Morgan swung into Midnight's stirrups.

The stallion's off side was in shadow, the moonlight streaming down from the opposite angle. And even as his body settled into the cantleboard, Morgan hooked his big Chihuahua spurs hard into Midnight's flank.

Unaccustomed to the prick of steel, Midnight snorted angrily and reared on his hind legs. Twice again Morgan roweled the black, the movement of his cowboot unnoticed by the excited Regulators.

Taking the bit in his teeth, the high-spirited stallion bogged his head down and started sunfishing like an untamed fuzztail. Rocking in saddle, Wayne Morgan felt his gray Stetson fly into the air. Regulators yelled excitedly as they saw the waddy grab leather and fight to keep his stirrups.

THEN, bucking furiously, Midnight arched his back—and Wayne Morgan went tail-over-tincup to land with a jarring smash on the rocks at Marshal Pederson's feet.

Dazed and gasping, Morgan felt the lawman help him to his feet. Shaking his head in feigned grogginess, Morgan turned to scan the snorting black, as Midnight pawed the rocks angrily with a steel-shod hoof.

"That's—the first nag—that ever piled me!" gasped Morgan. "Darned if I wouldn't—like to own the Masked Rider's hoss. I'd—break him to har-

BLUE HAWK

ness—'fore I was finished."

Roars of laughter greeted the waddy's announcement, and Morgan felt the marshal pumping his hand.

"Not guilty!" chuckled the lawman. "Yuh can be glad yuh didn't stick on Midnight's saddle, Morgan, under the circumstances."

Morgan brushed past Blue Hawk as he lurched over to the snorting stallion and seized Midnight's bit ring. He heard the Yaqui exhale his pent-up breath, and knew his partner was inwardly exulting over the clever ruse his comrade had pulled.

"All right—Sam Eichner, yuh're next!" rasped the marshal. "Hang on to them reins, Morgan, until this kraut has a try at stickin' in Midnight's saddle."

A steely hush settled over the Regulators as Betty Noonan's escaped kidnapper approached the horse gingerly.

"This test ain't fair!" croaked Eichner. "This hoss may be bucked out. If he sets still with me on him, it don't prove I'm the Masked Rider."

Pederson shook his head grimly.

"Get astride, Eichner. I got a hunch Midnight could buck off this whole posse, one after the other. If yuh ain't the Masked Rider yuh got nothin' to w o r r y about—except pickin' a soft spot to land!"

All eyes were trained on Sam Eichner, as the gun-slung stranger took the reins which Wayne Morgan handed him and reached up to fit a stirrup to a hobnailed boot-toe.

And because the possemen's attention was riveted to the next candidate to ride Midnight, they did not see the waddy, Wayne Morgan, pull the black's head down and whisper into the stallion's ear.

"Easy, boy!" Morgan said, patting Midnight's muzzle. "Easy."

The highly trained stallion tried to nuzzle its master, as Morgan stepped away. Obedient to his owner's voice to an uncanny degree, trained as few mounts had been trained, Midnight completely ignored the German prospector who was clambering aboard.

Jaws dropped open in amazement, as Sam Eichner settled into the saddle.

Midnight did not flicker an eyelash!

The color bleached from Eichner's stubbled face, as he stared down at the beautiful arched neck of the horse between his knees, as if imploring Midnight to buck his hardest. But the animal remained motionless as a statue carved in ebony.

"No—no!" screamed Eichner, his eyes rolling in terror. "This ain't fair! I'm bein' framed by a mangy fuzztail! This hoss ain't a one-man nag! It's all bucked out, I tell you!"

Eichner hammered the black's ribs with his high-laced boots, but Midnight remained as docile as a wooden image.

MARSHAL PEDERSON'S jaw locked grimly as he motioned Sam Eichner to dismount.

"We'll try Nemah and Trondson and Naselle," the lawman said, "just to make shure there ain't any mistake. Hazeltine, shove a gun in Eichner's belly and take his smokepoles."

Eichner was livid with terror and rage as the editor came forward to take his six-guns from holsters. Then, berserk, Eichner made the mistake of swinging on Hazeltine. Instantly Wayne Morgan and two other possemen had seized the frantic outlaw and pinioned his arms to his side.

In rapid succession, Torvald Trondson and Tom Naselle and Fred Nemah attempted to ride Midnight, but in each case the horse bucked like a man-killer and the three suspects were catapulted summarily into the discard.

"Eichner's the Masked Rider!" Pederson bawled above the pandemonium of voices. "A hoss couldn't lie!"

Striding over to where Blue Hawk was standing, eyes averted, the marshal thrust a six-gun into the Yaqui's side.

"All right, Redskin!" he demanded savagely. "You seen Midnight's performance. Are yuh stickin' by that hoss' judgment? Are yuh admittin' Sam Eichner is yore pard, the Masked Rider?"

Blue Hawk looked up, his eyes sad and despairful as he stared at Sam Eichner.

"Tell him the truth, yuh redskinned sidewinder!" screamed Eichner. "Tell him I ain't the Masked Rider!"

Time seemed to stand still in the box canyon, as Blue Hawk inhaled deeply and shook his head slowly from side to side.

"The jig is up, Senor," the Yaqui told Sam Eichner. "There is no use for me to lie, *amigo*. These men know you are the Masked Rider. The blame must go on Midnight."

Wayne Morgan felt Eichner sway under his grasp as if he were about to drop. Before the outraged German could protest, the voice of Marshal Pederson broke up the posse meeting:

"Let's go, men! Back to Placer Bar—to hold a kangaroo court over Blue Hawk and the Masked Rider! I reckon our work is done!"

CHAPTER VII

Sentenced to Stretch Rope

NOT since the original gold strike in Roaring River Canyon, back in 1850, had the camp of Placer Bar known such a night as the one which followed the triumphant return of Marshal Russ Pederson and his Regulators.

Wayne Morgan made the trip back to the gold camp on foot, thankful that in the excitement of their victory the Regulators had not noticed that their cowboy associate did not have a saddle horse waiting back in the cavvy at the mouth of Nugget Gulch. His own mounts had been taken into custody by the marshal.

But the discrepancy went unnoticed, and Morgan merely bided his time until the Regulators had headed eastward up the rim-rock trail, followed by the string of freight-laden mules. Then the cowboy had set out on foot for Placer Bar.

He arrived in the gold camp shortly before dawn, to find every saloon in town doing a booming business. Each bar had its share of Regulators who had joined in the capture of the Masked Rider, and eager to tell their cronies about the dramatic part the black stallion, Midnight, had played in the famous outlaw's capture.

Mingling freely with the sidewalk throngs, Wayne Morgan soon learned that Blue Hawk and Sam Eichner had been lodged in the red brick jailhouse overlooking the town.

Gossip had it that the Masked Rider was insane with rage against his Indian companion for double-crossing him in a pinch, and to keep the two "ex-partners" from each other's throats, Marshal Pederson had been forced to lodge his prisoners in separate cells.

August Mangells, owner of the Butterfly Mine out on Granite Creek, had been in town when the posse returned, and Pederson had immediately confronted the mine boss with Sam Eichner's statement that he worked as a mucker on Mangells' diggings.

"Never saw him before in my life!" Mangells was quoted as saying, when the supposed Masked Rider was brought before him. "Or if I had hired him, Marshal, I wouldn'ta known he was the Masked Rider."

Hunting out a restaurant on the main street, Wayne Morgan appeased his ravenous appetite, at the same time keeping his eyes and ears open.

News was already going through the mining camp that the Masked Rider and his Indian partner would be given a fair trial at the Regulator's kangaroo court session, to convene tomorrow afternoon at two o'clock in the Placer Bar court-house. Bets were being laid that the famous outlaws would stretch hemp before another sunset.

"This guy Eichner keeps claimin' he's been framed," Morgan overheard a patron tell the restaurant man. "But bein' the Masked Rider, he'd shore claim he wasn't. Seems Eichner can't prove he *ain't* the Masked Rider, either. Nobody in Placer Bar ever seen him before, includin' August Mangells, and Eichner claimed he worked at Mangells' diggin's."

Though he was exhausted from lack of sleep and the ordeal he had gone through in the past twelve hours, Wayne Morgan scouted around long enough to discover that Midnight and the other three horses had been lodged in the county jail stables. Following the legal disposure of their owners, the marshal had announced, the four horses would be sold at public auction.

IN THE black hour before the sunrise, Wayne Morgan located the county stables in the rear of the barred-windowed jailhouse where Eichner and Blue Hawk were being held prisoner. As he passed the calaboose, Morgan was amused to hear Sam Eichner beating at his cell door and screaming oaths at Blue Hawk in another cell.

"Yuh blasted Injun!" Eichner was howling. "Yuh heathen liar! You know that Midnight hoss played a trick on me, lettin' me ride him. Yuh got to tell the truth at that kangaroo court trial, or I'll stretch hang-rope!"

Going back to the stable, Morgan found it unguarded. He paused a moment at Midnight's stall to pet the stallion, then he rumaged along the row of saddles hanging from wall pegs until he found his own.

When he left the stable, he was carrying his Masked Rider's costume in Midnight's saddle-bags, slung over

his shoulder. He might have use for that costume before the day was over.

Inquiry disclosed that the only hotel in town was a ramshackle two-story building near the Eagle Syndicate's stampmill. It was known as Mrs. Bremer's Boarding House. There Morgan rented a room for the night and, hiding his saddle-bags in a closet, turned in for a few hours sleep just as the sun's first rays were pouring through the window.

It was high noon when Wayne Morgan awoke, refreshed, but brooding mentally over the grim task which lay before him.

What fate overtook Sam Eichner, Morgan was not worrying about, for the German was obviously an owl-hooter and a killer wolf. But Blue Hawk—it was unthinkable that he could permit his Yaqui partner to meet a gallows finish. Blue Hawk had gladly submitted to arrest, putting a blind trust in his partner to rescue him when the time was ripe.

Morgan's future actions were dependent on the outcome of this afternoon's kangaroo court meeting.

After a bath and a shave, Wayne Morgan went downstairs to eat in Mrs. Bremer's dining room. The waddy was seated opposite Ed Channon and Betty Noonan, and the young couple seemed occupied with their own thoughts.

"What I told the marshal about the Masked Rider saving your life yesterday won't mean a thing in the court-room, dear," the syndicate payroll clerk told his fiancée.

Wayne Morgan saw a tear roll down Betty Noonan's cheek, as she dabbled at her food.

"But those two men will go to their dooms on my account, Ed!" she protested. "That's what kept me awake all night, after I heard they had been captured. To think that I was indirectly responsible for the Masked Rider's capture—it's maddening!"

Leaving their meal half finished, Betty and Ed Channon left the boarding house. Their eyes had met Wayne Morgan's, but it was obvious that they saw no connection between the handsome cowboy stranger at their table and the masked man who had rescued the girl from Sam Eichner and his kidnapers the day before.

On a hunch, Wayne Morgan headed for the Placer Bar courthouse an hour in advance of the Regulator's trial. He found the court-room already well filled, and it was only with difficulty that he managed to find standing room in the rear of the hall.

Promptly at two o'clock, a buzz of excitement swept the packed room as twelve Regulators, chosen for jury duty, filed into their box.

EXCITEMENT became a raucous bedlam when a rear door of the courtroom opened and Marshal Russ Pederson entered with Blue Hawk and Sam Eichner, both prisoners handcuffed and under a heavy guard.

Since the only law in the diggings was that of Pederson and his Regulators, ordinary rules of legal procedure were dispensed with and, in the absence of a circuit judge, Pederson himself occupied the bench.

Sam Eichner's bloated face was gray and mottled, his eyes red-rimmed from a sleepless night in the Placer Bar jail. Blue Hawk, on the other hand, had rested well. The Indian's eyes roved over the jammed spectators, finally picking out Wayne Morgan in the rear of the room. The cowboy nodded imperceptibly, and saw Hawk's tense expression relax.

"This kangaroo court is now in session." Russ Pederson silenced the clamor by hammering the bench with the butt of a six-gun. "The prisoners before the bar of justice are too well-known to merit any long-winded explanation of who they are. I reckon everybody west of the Pecos has heard of the Masked Rider and Blue

Hawk."

Sam Eichner lurched to his feet, his handcuffs rattling in the silence.

"I ain't the Masked Rider!" he choked out hoarsely. "If August Mangells don't speak up and tell the truth, I'll spill the reason why I *am* in this gold camp!"

Wayne Morgan's eyes flashed with interest, as he alone in the smoke-clouded room caught the significance of Eichner's outburst. Was August Mangells, the Butterfly Mine owner, mixed up in Betty Noonan's abortive kidnap attempt of the day before, and the proposed pay-roll robbery?

There was a bustle in the fore part of the spectators, and Morgan saw a beefy man with a bandage wrapped around his head swing around the corner of the defense table and stoop to whisper something in Eichner's ear. Whatever it was, Eichner relaxed into his seat. When the whisperer turned to go back to the spectators' section, Wayne Morgan recognized the bandaged face of Gus Asplund, the Syndicate engineer who had betrayed the Masked Rider's presence in Ed Channon's office.

"Just a minute, Asplund!" roared the marshal. "What did yuh just say to the Masked Rider?"

Asplund turned to face the bench.

"I—uh—I was tellin' him to be shore and bring out that it was me who was responsible for his capture, even if I was knocked out and couldn't go along with the posse last night, Marshal." Asplund's quavering voice reached the end of the court-room. "That was all. I—I want to make sure I get the reward for the Masked Rider's capture."

Laughter and jeers swept through the court-room as Asplund wriggled back to his seat.

"No more whisperin' to the prisoners, or I'll fine yuh for contempt of court!" Pederson rumbled. "Yuh'll get yore share of the Masked Rider's bounty money, Asplund. And lose the respect of every man in Placer Bar to boot."

The trial, such as it was, did not last long.

Eichner, called to testify in his own defense, continued to deny stubbornly that he was the Masked Rider. Blue Hawk, however, contradicted the ugly German, insisting the Eichner had been his companion in outlawry for years.

THE marshal, referring to a number of reward posters on his bench—some of them yellowed with age—tolled off a number of crimes ticketed to the Masked Rider, and then sent the Placer Bar jury out of the room.

When the Regulators returned, it was only three o'clock. The entire trial had lasted but forty minutes by the clock.

Hazeltine, acting as foreman of the vigilante jury, got to his feet and announced in the deathlike hush:

"It goes without sayin' that we found the defendants, Blue Hawk and Masked Rider, guilty on all charges read ag'in 'em. The Regulators leave sentence up to yore discretion, marshal."

Wayne Morgan leaned forward tensely as he saw burly deputies haul Blue Hawk and the struggling, swearing Sam Eichner before the bar of justice to receive sentence.

"It is the rulin' of this court," Marshal Russ Pederson intoned judicially, "that havin' been found guilty, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk will be hanged by the neck until dead—"

A flurry of excitement swept the courtroom, almost drowning out the words Wayne Morgan was most anxious to hear:

"—tomorrer at sunrise, at the official hangin' tree at the east end of Placer Bar. Now, court's adjourned *sine die*."

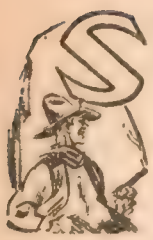
Night fell over Placer Bar and found the California gold town over-

crowded with miners. News had spread up and down the Mother Lode diggings concerning the sensational capture and trial of the Masked Rider, and every jackleg muckler and gold-panning prospector within a thirty-mile radius of the town abandoned his sluice box and cradle to be on hand for the morrow's double hanging.

Not since 1851, when members of Joaquin Murietta's gang of cutthroats had met their doom under the gnarled liveoak hang-tree in Placer Bar, had the diggings been treated to celebrities of the caliber of the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk.

CHAPTER VIII

Guns of the Masked Rider



SHORTLY after nightfall, Betty Noonan left her room at Mrs. Bremer's Boarding House and made her way up the hillside to her fiancé's office at the Eagle Mining Syndicate mills. She found Ed Channon pacing the floor in an agony of suspense.

"I know—you're worrying about why no mention was made at the trial of the Masked Rider saving me from those kidnapers yesterday," the girl said, when Channon had placed a chair for her. "That surely proves, to us at least, that the Masked Rider isn't the craven killer he is painted to be."

Channon buried his face in his hands.

"We *know* the Masked Rider and his Indian partner are on the level, Betty!" groaned the pay-roll clerk. "Last night before Gus Asplund brought the Regulators around to capture the Masked Rider, they proved their honesty."

The young couple lapsed into a moody silence, their eyes drawn to the Eagle Syndicate's small safe in Channon's office. Twenty-four hours ago almost to the minute, that safe had been opened in the Masked Rider's presence, and the Robin Hood outlaw had helped Channon wrap the pay-roll currency in a bundle of dynamite sticks, as a means of thwarting the potential robbery of the safe.

During that time, prior to the arrival of Russ Pederson and his Regulators, the Masked Rider could easily have whipped out his guns and stolen the syndicate pay-roll. But Channon, trusting the two outlaws even as Betty had done, had opened the safe and revealed the treasure of currency without fear.

That alone was indicative of the Masked Rider's inherent trustworthiness, in Channon's estimation.

"There's absolutely nothing we can do, Betty," the pay-roll clerk said despairingly. "As one of the Regulators, I've got to stand my shift at guarding the jail tonight. I relieve Hazeltine at twelve o'clock."

Betty Noonan crossed the floor and knelt at her fiancé's side, gripping Channon's hands impulsively.

"You'll be guarding the jail at midnight?" she asked anxiously. "Then—couldn't you unlock the Masked Rider's cell, make it look as if accomplices from the outside had done the job?"

Channon shook his head.

"No, honey. Russ Pederson's taking no chances. He's got the jail surrounded with guards. The marshal isn't running the risk of a possible lynching bee. Besides, it is well-known that the Masked Rider has no other friend than Blue Hawk. He doesn't run with a wolf pack, like some outlaws do. He—"

A soft rap at the door caused Betty Noonan to jump to her feet. She remained at the desk while Ed Channon went to the door.

An instant later she heard Channon cry out in astonishment, as into the

room slipped a familiar figure clad in coal-black Stetson, domino mask and flowing cloak.

"The Masked Rider!" Betty whispered sharply. "Then you—you have escaped—"

The Masked Rider stepped over to the window and pulled down the blind. Then he turned, facing the dumbfounded couple with a flashing smile.

"No. It's a long story, folks, but the Masked Rider wasn't captured in Nugget Gulch last night."

"But that Dutchman at the kangaroo court trial—Eichner—"

The Masked Rider laughed softly.

"Eichner," he explained, "was the kidnaper who got away from us yesterday, Miss Noonan. Yuh remember I saw his face when his mask fell away. That was why Blue Hawk pretended to the Regulators that Sam Eichner was me. He figgered Eichner deserved to swing."

BETTY NOONAN and Ed Channon continued to stare at the Robin Hood outlaw as if they were seeing a ghost. But the Masked Rider's modulated voice was unmistakably that of the Western cavalier who had rescued her from the kidnap trio the day before.

"But I — I don't savvy how you pulled a trick like that on Sam Eichner!" protested the payroll clerk.

The Masked Rider seated himself on the desk, spinning a six-gun on its trigger guard. Channon had no way of knowing that the Masked Rider's guns were likewise the guns of Wayne Morgan, the cowboy who had eaten lunch across the table from them that day. In keeping with his dual rôle, the Masked Rider had seen to it that Wayne Morgan's clothing and six-guns were inconspicuous.

"There isn't time to explain everything now," the Masked Rider evaded. "I have come to yuh because you two are the only people in Placer Bar who trust me. Yuh see, Blue Hawk *is* my pard. And he's sentenced to be hanged tomorrow at sunrise."

Ed Channon spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"Betty and I have been racking our brains trying to figure out some way to get Blue Hawk and you—er, Sam Eichner — out of jail," the payroll clerk said. "It's no use. Marshal Pederson has the place under heavy guard."

The Masked Rider smiled enigmatically.

"I know," he said. "I happened to overhear, outside before I knocked at the door, that yuh're relievin' Mr. Hazeltine at midnight, as one of the guards. Less than an hour ago, I visited the jail and saw that our newspaper editor is stationed at the front door of the jail. Yuh'll be there?"

Channon nodded, frowning uncertainly.

"Then mebbe it won't strain yore conscience too much," the Masked Rider proposed, "if I visit yuh, say, around two o'clock in the mornin'. I'll make it appear that I slugged yuh in the dark and tied yuh up. Then I'll go inside and rescue Blue Hawk. And leave Sam Eichner in his cell. The town's particular interested in seein' the Masked Rider hanged—not the Indian."

Channon's eyes lighted eagerly. Then his expression was wiped off by a frown of dismay.

"It still can't be done, Masked Rider. Marshal Pederson has the keys to the cell Blue Hawk is in. He wouldn't turn over the keys to any of the jail guards."

A weighty silence fell over the trio. It was broken by a glad cry from Betty Noonan, who jumped from her chair and headed for the door.

"Wait here," she said. "I'll be back in two shakes of a lamb's tail. I think —perhaps—I can pay in some measure for what you did for me yesterday evening, Masked Rider."

Without further explanation, the girl vanished into the night.

"I shore hope she knows what she's doin'," the Masked Rider laughed. He glanced at the syndicate safe. "The pay-roll still there? Yuh haven't seen any suspicious characters hangin' around today, lookin' over yore office shack?"

Channon shook his head.

"No. The pay-roll is wraped in dynamite sticks, as you suggested. And the remaining space in the safe is packed with dynamite. If a burglar tried to blow up that strong-box, he'll wreck the whole place."

Fifteen minutes elapsed before Betty Noonan, flushed and panting, returned to the office. Then, holding her golden head proudly, she marched across the room and tossed into the Masked Rider's lap a massive iron key.

"What in—"

"The key to Blue Hawk's cell!" Betty said exultantly. "It's a duplicate to the one Marshal Pederson carries in his pocket."

CHANNON and the Masked Rider stared at the key in amazement.

"It—it can't be possible!" exclaimed the pay-roll clerk. "I've known Russ Pederson for years. I know he couldn't possibly be talked into releasing a prisoner this way."

Betty shook her head, her eyes dancing.

"I got that key from Russ' wife," she explained. "Ethel Pederson has been like a mother to me. I teach her children in school. She even got me my teacher's job here in Placer Bar. That key will unlock any cell in the entire jail."

"But how—" protested Channon.

"I explained the set-up, and told Ethel what the Masked Rider did with those kidnapers," the girl said. "I swore her to secrecy, and in return she gave me one of her husband's duplicate keys. The rest is up to you, Ed, and the Masked Rider."

The Robin Hood outlaw slid off the desk and pocketed the key. Heading for the door, he paused to bestow a warm smile of gratitude at the smiling pair.

"Our score is even, Miss Noonan," the Masked Rider said. *"Hasta luego.* I'll see yuh at the jail later tonight, Channon."

The man of mystery vanished into the night.

When twelve o'clock struck from the court-house tower clock, Ed Channon presented himself at the Placer Bar jail where Hazeltine, publisher of the weekly *Mining News,* was seated on the jailhouse steps, a shotgun cradled across his knees.

"Yuh'll stand guard till four o'clock in the mornin', Ed," Hazeltine said, relinquishing the buckshot gun to the new guard. "If yuh see any of them barflies comin' up to the jail, yell a warnin' to the Regulators guardin' the back entrance. Pederson ain't expectin' no lynch talk, but he wants us to be on the alert."

Hazentine plodded off into the darkness to get a few hour's sleep before being on hand at the town hang-tree at sunrise. Ed Channon settled himself at the jail door, and waited for time to pass.

Two o'clock had struck from the court-house clock before the Masked Rider materialized from the darkness as if by magic. So quietly had he approached the jail that Channon was on his feet, fingers on shotgun triggers, when he heard the Robin Hood outlaw's whisper.

"All set, Channon?"

The pay-roll clerk nodded, his pulses racing.

"*'Sta bueno.* I'll rope yuh up hand and foot, Channon, to make this look natural. I hate to do it, but I'll have to knock some skin off yore jaw, when I'm finished."

Channon gulped hard.

"Sock me a good wallop, Masked

Rider," he said, reaching out to grip the mystery rider's hand. "It's little enough to do for Blue Hawk and you."

Working swiftly, the Masked Rider bound up the jail guard with the lariat he had carried with him.

"I visited the stables at midnight and got our four hosses out into the timber without anybody knowin' what happened," the black-clad outlaw whispered. "We'll let the punch in the chin wait until Blue Hawk has thanked yuh, son."

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SLIPPING through the door of Pederson's office, the Masked Rider groped his way into the cell block. Raucous snores came from one of the cells, telling that Sam Eichner had at last succumbed to exhaustion and was dead to the world.

"Senor?"

Blue Hawk's whisper guided the Masked Rider to the Indian's cell. Taking the key which Betty Noonan had obtained for him, the Robin Hood outlaw opened the cell lock cautiously to prevent waking up Sam Eichner. A moment later the two partners were shaking hands warmly in the darkness.

"I knew you would be here tonight, Senor," whispered the Yaqui, as they headed on tiptoe for the front door. "You are a worker of miracles, *amigo*."

The two paused at the front steps, where Ed Channon lay in his bonds. A whispered word of explanation from the Masked Rider, and Blue Hawk knelt to squeeze the pay-roll clerk's shoulder in appreciation for his cooperation in the jail break.

"When you and Miss Noonan exchange yore vows," the Masked Rider whispered, "yuh might mail a letter to a certain Sam Jones in Las Vegas, Nevada, care General Delivery. Got that?"

Channon nodded.

"*Adios*," he whispered. "I don't reckon we'll ever forget what you've—"

Wok! A grazing blow of the Masked Rider's fist brought a well of blood from Channon's jaw. The pay-roll clerk sagged back, dazed by the punch which would eliminate him from suspicion when Blue Hawk's escape was discovered by the gold camp marshal.

Before Channon's brain had a chance to clear, Blue Hawk and the Masked Rider were melting into the night on their way to their waiting horses, back in the safety of the pines.

CHAPTER IX

Outlaw Conclave

WHILE most of Placer Bar's rough, gun-slung citizens were whipping themselves into a frenzy in preparation for the morrow's hanging bee, the Masked Rider and his accomplices, Ed Channon and Betty Noonan, were not the only individuals engaged in jail-break plans.

In a dugout dwelling high on the north slope of Roaring River Canyon, its log front overlooking the sprawled mining camp, a secret conference had been called by the dugout's owner, Gus Asplund. The chunky donkey-engine tender from the Eagle Mining Syndicate mills had tightly shuttered his dugout window with several layers of gunnysacking, and the two men with him had been cautioned to speak in low tones, against the possibility of being overheard by eavesdroppers.

Asplund's visitors were August Mangells, owner of the Butterfly Diggings on Granite Creek, some ten miles north of Placer Bar; and John Henderson, a tinhorn gambler who fleeced miners out of hard-earned golddust at his Red Tent Emporium of Chance, down on the main street of the town.

Tonight, Henderson had relegated the management of his roulette wheel, chuckaluck cage, monte and poker and blackjack tables to his helpers. The day's developments, insofar as they concerned Sam Eichner, were of more vital importance to these three than anything else.

The dugout was blue with tobacco smoke and redolent of human sweat and whisky fumes. The atmosphere was stuffy from the radiating heat of a barrel stove in a far corner. But the strain of jagged nerves, taut with suspense as they watched the hands of Asplund's alarm clock crawl toward two a. m., accounted for most of the sweat which rinsed the hairy faces of the trio.

"It beats arything I ever heard of," Gus Asplund repeated for the twentieth time, as he hunkered over the crude table where Mangells and Henderson were fortifying themselves with the pseudo courage contained in a quart of red-eye. "That Injun, Blue Hawk, tellin' that kangaroo court this afternoon that Sam Eichner was the Masked Rider. What was the redskin's idear?"

August Mangells chewed on his cigar stub, and took a drink from his glass of rotgut. Mangells was a bull-necked man, once a South Bend banker who had absconded with the institution's funds, caroused his way through the stolen fortune in a couple of years, and finally, caught in the backwash of criminal life, had drifted to the El Dorado country to have a fling at gold mining.

Mangells had acquired the old-time Butterfly Mine on Granite Creek for a song, and was eking out a bare living by working over the mine tailings left by the Forty-niners. Butterfly Mine itself was a catacombs of petered-out drifts and crosscuts.

"The redskin's idea is plain enough to understand to anyone who has something else besides a cantaloupe for a head!" snapped Mangells irritably, glaring at Gus Asplund. "The real Masked Rider gave the Regulators the slip in Nugget Gulch last night, and the Indian is covering up his escape by claiming Sam Eichner is the Masker Rider. What has Blue Hawk got to lose?"

GUS ASPLUND waggled his bandaged head ruefully. His skull still ached from the pistol blow the Masked Rider had given him at the Syndicate stampmill the night before.

"Sam told me last night, when I

rousted him out for the posse Russ Pederson was organizin'," Asplund said, "that the Masked Rider shot it out with Si Cochran an' Jack Welch, just after they'd grabbed the Noonan girl. I got a hunch Blue Hawk and the Masked Rider knew that Sam Eichner was the kidnaper who got away, and are just tryin' to railroad him to the gallows on general principals."

August Mangells swigged down another stiff dram of whisky and stared at his two companions quizzically.

"If it wasn't that I'm dead broke and need my share of that pay-roll *dinero* of Ed Channon's," the ex-banker grumbled, "I'd say the devil with trying to get Eichner out of jail tonight. Didn't Eichner threaten to spill the beans about us, during the kangaroo trial?"

John Henderson, the gambler, fanned his perspiring face with his beaver top-hat and nodded grimly.

"Yeah. Eichner was about to squeal on us to the marshal, if Asplund here hadn't whispered somethin' to him that made Sam draw in his horns. What in blazes did yuh tell him, Gus?"

The Syndicate engineer slumped into a chair.

"I told him to keep his lip close-buttoned—that we would rescue him out of the Regulator jail some time tonight. I had to tell him that, boys, or Eichner would have told the whole story—how John Henderson here sent down to Hornitas for him and his two pards, to make that pay-roll hold-up for us, on shares. With me actin' as a spy to tip him off when Ed Channon would have the currency on hand."

Henderson laced his tapering, fish-belly-white hands together and stared moodily at his partners. Run out of Hornitas by an outraged poker player who had caught Henderson cold-decking him, the card sharp had set up business in Placer Bar. As criminals have a knack of doing, Gus Asplund and Mangells had got in contact with Henderson, and plotted the robbery of the big Eagle Syndicate's monthly pay-roll, amounting to over a hundred thousand dollars in greenbacks.

In order to make the robbery appear to be an outside job, so that suspicion could never be directed at them, the trio of conspirators had decided to send for Henderson's old-time owlhoot leader, Sam Eichner, and two of Eichner's gunhawks—who now were fish bait in Roaring River canyon, as a result of their brief show-down with the Masked Rider.

It had been Eichner's idea to kidnap Betty Noonan, after learning from Gus Asplund that Channon's fiancée made a habit of taking a horseback ride to the Bulletin Board redwood tree every evening. With the beautiful young school-teacher in their clutches, Eichner was positive Ed Channon would turn over the Syndicate's pay-roll without a shot being fired, as ransom for the girl he intended to marry.

But the intervention of the Robin Hood man of mystery, the Masked Rider, had altered all that. And now Sam Eichner, himself branded with the Masked Rider's name, was due to swing from the town hang-tree in only three more hours.

"I'm in favor of lettin' Sam Eichner stretch hemp, boys!" Gus Asplund declared hotly. "After all, I'm in line for a five-thousand-dollar bounty, payable for the Masked Rider's capture. The Regulators think Eichner is the Masked Rider, so they'll pay that reward."

AUGUST MANGELLS started to agree, but John Henderson leaped from his chair and hammered the table angrily.

"No!" thundered the gambler, his pale, yellow-flecked eyes flickering

dangerously. "I sent for Eichner to lift this pay-roll for us, and I'm not lettin' him down. Besides which, I'll stake my last blue chip that Sam would betray all three of us to Marshal Pederson in the mornin', if he felt hang-rope about his craw and we hadn't done anything to rescue him."

The tinhorn's statement put an ashen pallor on the faces of Mangells and Asplund, and their defiance ebbed as quickly as it had flared to the surface. A word from Sam Eichner, and the wrath of the Regulators might well bring swift retribution down on Eichner's conspirators.

"It's two o'clock!" barked Henderson, consulting a jewel-crusted watch and comparing it with Asplund's clock. "By now, Ed Channon will be standin' guard at the jailhouse. Yuh're a friend of Ed's, Asplund. It's up to you to jab a gun in Channon's middle, while Mangells and me try to get Sam Eichner out of the hoosegow."

A moan escaped the engineer's lips.

"I *was* a friend o' Channon's," he admitted. "I was for a long time, with the idea of gettin' the info about his pay-roll shipments. But after last night—me gettin' the Regulators to surround his shack and try and capture the Masked Rider—I ain't so shore Ed Channon won't feel like I'm his worst enemy."

John Henderson strode purposefully to the door of the dugout, his blade-thin lips locked tightly.

"Come on, you two!" snapped the gambler. "We got to have Sam Eichner out of jail inside the hour. It's a risk we got to run, to protect our own interests."

Gus Asplund buckled on his gunbelt and blew out the lantern which hung from a pole rafter of the dugout. Then he followed Henderson and August Mangells out into the night.

Avoiding the blaze of light and the surge and flow of traffic on the main street, the three outlaws made their way to the south slope of the gulch and, invisible in the starless night, worked their way up to the red brick jail building.

They made a circuit of the calaboose, noting the ebb and glow of cigarette coals in the darkness, where Regulators were posted under each barred window of the jail, with three guards maintaining an alert vigil at the rear door of the cell block. Dimly through the murk they made out the figure of Ed Channon, the Syndicate clerk, propped up in a sitting posture on the front doorway of the jail.

"All right, Asplund!" rasped John Henderson, prodding the engineer in the spine with a derringer muzzle. "Get goin'. When Channon challenges yuh, tell him yuh've come to apologize for tellin' the marshal that the Masked Rider was visitin' him. When yuh get close enough to shake hands, clout Channon on the noggin with yore hogleg."

Teeth chattering with dread, Gus Asplund made his way toward the still figure on the doorstep. The nearer he approached, the more his ears strained for a sign that Channon had spotted him.

A moment later, Asplund was staring in amazement at the ropes which bound Channon's arms and legs. Blood was oozing from a fresh bruise on the clerk's jaw, and Channon was moaning faintly, his face twitching as he fought to clear his senses.

"What in thunder!" whispered Asplund. "Somebody's beat me to it! Somebody must have already got Eichner out!"

STEPPING over Channon's stirring form, Asplund made his way into the cell block. Groping his way from cell to cell, the engineer's trembling fingers encountered an unlocked door, with a massive key jutting from it!

Withdrawing the key, his heart pounding wildly, Asplund was in the act of whispering Sam Eichner's name, when he heard a straw tick on a cot in a nearby cell creak under the weight of a man turning over in his sleep, and then a steady cadence of snoring. Groping his way to the cell, Asplund unlocked it and, entering the iron-grated cage, reached out to grip the sleeper by the shoulder.

With a grunt, Sam Eichner reared to a sitting position, eyes batting wide awake in the darkness.

"Who in—"

"*Sshh!* It's me, Sam—yore pard, Gus Asplund. Didn't I tell yuh in that kangaroo court-room I'd get yuh out of this jail before they could hang yuh?"

CHAPTER X

Pay-roll Robbery

MANGELLS and John Henderson were waiting tensely in the darkness outside the jail when Gus Asplund returned, his arm linked triumphantly through Sam Eichner's.

"Jumpin' Jehosephat!" whispered the gambler, as he recognized Eichner's bullet-head and brushy pompadour in the gloom. "How'd yuh do it so pronto, Gus? Did Channon have the jail keys on him?"

Asplund shrugged in the darkness.

"Hanged if I know *what* happened!" he said. "Channon was hog-tied and groggy from a punch on the jaw. There was a key stickin' in one of the cells, and—"

"It was that Injun's cell!" cut in Sam Eichner. "Whoever knocked out that guard musta rescued Blue Hawk. And I got a hunch it was the Masked Rider who done that, while I was asleep—and left me locked up to swing in his place! I'll notch my gunsights on that black-hatted buscadero if it's the last thing I ever do—"

Asplund tugged at Eichner's arm in the darkness.

"We better be vamosin'," whispered the engineer. "Ed Channon may be wakin' up ary minute, or some Regulator come around to get a match an' find out what's happened. Let's rattle our hocks back to my dugout."

Elated by the incredible ease with which they had effected Sam Eichner's rescue under the very noses of the heavy guard of Regulators surrounding the Placer Bar jail, the outlaws headed off stealthily through the darkness. Mid-way down the slope, out of earshot of the jail, Sam Eichner suddenly halted.

"Just a second, *amigos!*" the German owlhooter said gruffly. "Yuh say Ed Channon was the knocked-out guard back at the *juzgado?*"

"Yes," Asplund replied curiously. "Why?"

"Didn't yuh tell me Channon sleeps at his Syndicate office, so's to guard that pay-roll safe, Gus?"

"Yeah. But—"

"*'Sta bueno.* We're getting' that pay-roll money tonight, just like we planned—and by sunrise I'll be on my way back to Hornitas with my share." Eichner's thick voice was vibrant with excitement. "After that kidnapin' fell through with, I decided we'd have to blow open that money-box."

The three outlaws joined in a protest against such a bold venture, here on the verge of the hanging festivities. Within the hour, Marshal Russ Pederson would be going up to the jail to get the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk, and would discover that the jail was empty.

But the three Placer Bar outlaws were easily swayed by their leader's masterful personality. Used to pushing his criminal schemes with ruthless agressiveness, Sam Eichner won out on his plan.

"Wait here, *amigos!*" the Hornitas outlaw growled. "Asplund, loan me yore six-shooter. . . . Thanks. I got a hunch we won't have to blow up that safe to get at that *dinero.* I'll be back in a couple of ticks."

Leaving his rescuers in various attitudes of dread and alarm, the beefy German vanished into the darkness, headed in the direction of the Regulator-surrounded jail he had just escaped.

Five interminable minutes dragged by, and then the crunch of Eichner's boots was heard coming down the hillside. When he came in view, the three outlaws saw that Eichner was carrying the insensible form of Ed Channon jack-knifed over one muscle-slapped shoulder.

"Channon was just about awake, so I clipped him ag'in," chuckled Eichner. "Come on—we're headin' for the Syndicate office where that safe is. We got no time to loose."

WITH Gus Asplund leading the way across the slope toward the looming stampmills of the Eagle Syndicate claim, Henderson and Mangells fell in step with the big desperado, who was toting Ed Channon's husky form as if he were a child.

"What's the idea bringin' Ed along?" demanded John Henderson. "Yuh should a left him back at the jailhouse, to delay things when the Regulators found him knocked out and roped up."

Eichner shook his head.

"You punkin-brained galoots don't believe in thinkin' out the easy way, do yuh?" jeered the outlaw. "Ed Channon knows the combination to that safe. With a gun stuck in his belly, he'll be glad to open that strong-box. 'Course we'd decided to do it another way, case of accident, but now—"

The first pale pink banners of approaching dawn were beginning to unfurl over the eastern Sierra Nevadas when the four outlaws arrived at the office shack below the Syndicate mills. A brief search of Channon's pockets brought the office keys to light, and soon the conspirators were inside. Making sure the single window was blinded, Gus Asplund lighted a kerosene lamp on Channon's desk.

Mangells and Eichner made their way at once to the square iron safe in the corner. Then they halted, staring down at the cardboard sign hanging by a string from the safe's combination knob:

WARNING!
This safe loaded with dynamite.
Blow up at your own risk!
E. C.

Sam Eichner laughed harshly.

"Dynamite, eh? That's a bluff, boys, to keep us from tryin' to blow up the box. Douse a bucket of water on Channon's head, and we'll prove there ain't any explosives in that safe!"

Obtaining a pitcher of drinking water from Channon's desk, Gus Asplund doused the contents over the pay-roll clerk's head. Spluttering, Channon opened his eyes and stared wildly about at the lamplighted faces of his captors.

"What—where in—"

Stooping, Sam Eichner lifted the rope-bound clerk and carried him over to the safe.

"We're honin' to get this safe opened the easy way, Channon!" clipped the outlaw. "Tell us the combination numbers, or we'll shoot yuh on the spot!"

Comprehension dawned slowly in Channon's eyes. The last he remembered, he was talking to the Masked Rider. Then had come the grazing punch on the jaw, which had stunned him. Eichner's blow had not been so gentle, however, and Channon's senses were still spinning groggily.

"Go—to blazes!" choked out the Syndicate clerk. "The way my head's swimmin', I can't remember that combination nohow. But even if I could,

I wouldn't tell it to you sidewinders."

With a savage oath, Sam Eichner cuffed Channon's cheek with the back of his hand, rocking the clerk's head on his shoulders. Dazed, Channon slumped back, his eyes glazing with insensibility.

Eichner looked up at his taut-faced henchmen, and bit out an oath.

"We're wastin' time tryin' to coax this busky," he grated. "Asplund, rustle a couple of hosses. We'll take this safe back into the tall timber where we'll be safe from the Regulators, an' I got ways of makin' Channon open up this box. If we can't do anything else, we'll blast it open—and rub Channon's nose in the payroll *dinero* before we blow his brains out!"

STARING at Channon's placard hanging from the safe knob, Gus Asplund shook his head.

"That dynamite ain't a bluff," the syndicate engineer contradicted. "The Masked Rider advised Ed to load the safe with explosives. We got to make Channon give us the combination."

Eichner chewed out an oath.

"Get goin'!" he snarled. "Bring hosses for us to make a getaway with, and two extry broncs to carry this safe along with us. Daylight's about here, and this town'll blow sky high when that jail break is discovered."

Henderson, Mangells and Asplund hurried off to carry out their leader's orders, While Eichner remained behind to tie a gag over Channon's face.

The first gray light of approaching dawn was bringing out the details of Placer Bar's false-framed saloons and sprawling dugouts, tents and slab huts, by the time the three outlaws returned with horses from John Henderson's private stable behind the Red Tent Emporium of Chance.

The safe weighed upwards to four hundred pounds, in spite of its small size. It took the combined strength of Sam Eichner and August Mangells to carry the strong-box out of the office and load it aboard a crude board-and-rope sling which Eichner fixed between two of the sturdier horses.

"I left a note behind sayin' Blue Hawk and the Masked Rider done this," Eichner chuckled, as he loaded Ed Channon's limp form aboard one of the horses. "I reckon turn about's fair play in ary man's language. The Masked Rider tried to see *me* strung up, so—"

Up the canyon from the direction of town came a clamor of yells, and the outlaws hastened into saddles as they realized the gold camp Regulators had discovered the jail break.

"We'll head for my Butterfly Mine, boys!" proposed August Mangells, as the cavalcade of outlaws headed into the timber behind the Eagle Syndicate mills. "We'll be safe over in Granite Creek, and we can take our own time makin' Channon open this safe."

Less than two minutes after the outlaws had vanished into the pines, the blazing sun lifted above the El Dorado horizon—to find Placer Bar convulsed with excitement. The news had spread that the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk, by some miraculous means, had succeeded in escaping the law's retribution at the Placer Bar hang-tree.

CHAPTER XI

El Dorado on a Man-Hunt

IN THE rocky fastnesses of the Sierra Nevada range, ten miles as the crow flies south of Placer Bar, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk were camped in the brushy recesses of a secluded *rincon* overlooking a wide stretch of country. With their four horses picketed back in the timber to graze, the two fugitives spread their bedrolls

and slept until the sun was mid-way up the morning sky.

Then, washing up in the icy waters of a burbling mountain stream, the two outlaws held a council of war.

"Sam Eichner's gone to Boot Hill by now, Hawk." The Masked Rider grinned, squinting up at the morning sun. "Marshal Pederson will comb the Sierras for a few days, huntin' you, I reckon. But at any rate, our job's done in Placer Bar. Ed Channon's pay-roll is safe, so is Betty Noonan, and that lobo who's been callin' hisself the Masked Rider will have to be hunted somewheres else."

Blue Hawk rubbed his whiskerless jaw thoughtfully. His stomach was gnawed by hunger, for his only meal in thirty-six hours had been the scanty one provided him in the jail by the Regulators.

"Our provisions have run out, Senor," the Yaqui reminded. "We are back where we were day before yesterday, when we arrived at the Bulletin Board tree. We still must buy food and ammunition before we can head on to Nevada or elsewhere. No?"

The Masked Rider nodded agreement.

"I'm sort of curious to find out what Placer Bar thinks of yore jail-break, anyhow," the Robin Hood outlaw laughed. "I'll get into my Wayne Morgan outfit and take a pasear over to town and stock up."

Blue Hawk's eyes slitted dubiously.

"Do not forget," he reminded the Masked Rider, "that our horses may be recognized by the Regulators who captured me in Nugget Canyon the other night."

The Masked Rider grinned once more stripping off his black cloak and Stetson and removing his domino mask.

"I'll take the roan," he said, "and leave him hid in the timber above Placer Bar. I reckon I'll pack what grub we need back to the hoss."

Donning the Stetson he wore when playing the rôle of Wayne Morgan, the mystery rider headed back into the trees and threw a saddle aboard his roan. Then, with a wave of farewell to his Yaqui comrade, Wayne Morgan headed northward in the direction of Placer Bar.

The sun was at the zenith by the time the cowboy topped a ridge overlooking the tar paper roofs and checkered mining claims of Roaring River Canyon.

Morgan's blue eyes glittered with austere amusement as he picked out now familiar landmarks—Ed Channon's office down by the Syndicate stampmill, Mrs. Bremer's sprawling two-story boarding house, the red brick jail and the county stable behind it, the ugly courthouse where he had seen a kangaroo court condemn Blue Hawk and Sam Eichner to death.

His eyes ranging to the eastward, Morgan could see the gnarled live-oak where Sam Eichner was scheduled to have been hanged at sunrise. On the slope beyond the hangtree, the sunlight glinting on tombstones in the fenced-off Boot Hill cemetery. He had played his luck hard and heavy, or he would be occupying a grave in that Boot Hill himself, Morgan realized.

SELECTING a brushy ravine which angled down toward the mining camp, Morgan rode until he was within a hundred yards of the uppermost fringe of miners' shacks and tents. There he picketed the roan in a bosque of red-barked manzanitas, and made his way down to the main street, Stetson tilted at a jaunty jack-deuce angle across his brow, his jinglebob spurs chiming musically as he strode along the board side walks.

Morgan was quick to notice the strained atmosphere of the gold camp. Knots of men were congregated under the wooden awnings of saloons and gambling halls, engaged in excited conversation.

Mining operations were at a standstill. The mountain silence was unprofaned by the thunderous roar of the Eagle Syndicate's ore-crushing stamps.

Heading into a canvas-roofed restaurant, Wayne Morgan ordered a breakfast of beefsteak, coffee, spuds and sourdough biscuits. It was while he was devouring his belated meal that the cowboy got his first inkling that Placer Bar's citizenry were not discussing the supposed execution of the Masked Rider.

"Don't it beat all, what happened up at the jail last night, stranger?" asked the talkative cook, as he brought back Morgan's change. "I'm wonderin' how Hazeltine will write this all up in next Friday's *Minin' News.* It's shore a mystery all right."

Squinting sharply at the restaurant man to make sure he had not been one of the pose at Nugget Gulch two nights before, the cowpuncher asked casually:

"Mystery? I hadn't heard. Just got to town."

The cook planted his elbows on the lunch counter, eyes flashing at the opportunity to discuss with a stranger the exciting news which had the mining camp agog.

"Yuh've heard of the Masked Rider and his Injun *compadre,* ain't yuh?"

Blowing on his steaming tin cup of coffee, Morgan nodded.

"Reckon everybody's heard of them owlhoots. What about 'em?"

The restaurant man inhaled deeply savoring the juicy morsel of gossip he was about to impart to the range rider before him.

"We-ell," drawled the cook, "our local Regulators captured them skunks and sentenced 'em to hang this mornin' at daylight. But blamed if they didn't escape jail durin' the night!"

Wayne Morgan's brows arched in genuine surprise. He lowered the cup of coffee without tasting it.

"Yuh mean both of 'em escaped?"

"They shore did, stranger. And not only that, they made off with Ed Channon, one of the Regulators who was guardin' the calaboose! Nobody knows where they got hold of our marshal's jail key, but they did."

Wayne Morgan straightened up, a pulse hammering on his temple.

"Let me get this straight," he said. "Both the Injun *and* the Masked Rider broke jail? Yuh didn't have a hanging today?"

The restaurant man shook his head.

"Nary a hangin'. And that ain't all." The narrator leaned forward confidentially. "The Masked Rider and his pard not only kidnaped Ed Channon, but they stole the Eagle Minin' Syndicate's pay-roll safe, to boot!"

Wayne Morgan left the restaurant in a daze of incredulity.

Something had indeed gone wrong here at Placer Bar, since he and Blue Hawk had made their getaway shortly after two o'clock that morning. By some mysterious turn of events, Sam Eichner, too, had escaped the vengeance of the Regulators!

THE kidnaping of Ed Channon left a cold, empty vacuum in the pit of Morgan's stomach. To confirm the restaurant man's gossip, the cowboy hurried over to the Syndicate office shack. He found a crowd of men around the building, and elbowed his way into the familiar office.

Betty Noonan was there, her eyes red with weeping. She was engaged in conversation with the gold camp marshal, Russ Pederson, as Wayne Morgan squirmed his way through the jam of men who packed Channon's office.

"The Masked Rider doublecrossed Ed, somehow, Russ!" the girl was saying huskily. "They kidnaped him to make him open that safe. It doesn't seem possible, after the way Ed trusted them."

Pederson's jaw knotted grimly.

"Yuh worry me sometimes, Miss Noonan," he said. "Even if yuh won't admit it, I know yuh was back of the Masked Rider's gettin' my duplicate key that I had in my dresser drawer over to the house. My wife won't talk — and that proves she musta helped yuh get that key."

Wayne Morgan, seeing that the excited spectators were staring at something over on the floor where the Syndicate safe had been, worked his his way over to see what was causing their excitement. It was a cardboard placard, which he had seen Ed Channon scribble his warning on, regarding the dynamite he had stowed in the vault at the Masked Rider's suggestion.

Now, something else had been added to Channon's sign, scrawled with the soft leaden tip of a cartridge:

DON'T EXPECT TO SEE ED CHANNON OR THE CONTENTS OF THIS SAFE AGAIN. THANKS FOR THE DINERO!

MASKED RIDER
AND
BLUE HAWK.

The room wheeled dizzily about Wayne Morgan as he stared at the forged signatures on the cardboard. He knew, in that ghastly moment, that Sam Eichner had had other henchmen besides the two kidnapers whom the Masked Rider's blazing guns had sent plunging to their dooms in Roaring River Canyon, two days ago.

The marshal's voice broke into his thoughts.

"If yuh haven't any clues to offer, Miss Betty, I'm afraid the Regulators are helpless," Pederson was telling the girl. "Ever since before daylight I been tryin' to track down clues. We know the Masked Rider lugged the safe away with hosses, but the tracks disappear into Golden Poppy Creek, a mile south of the mills. I got posses combin' the Sierras—"

Betty Noonan drew herself up defiantly.

"Don't you think I'd give you any information I possibly could?" cried the girl, a note of hysteria in her voice. "After all, it's my fiancé who has been kidnaped, this time."

Wayne Morgan left the pay-roll clerk's office and hurried back downtown. He learned from snatches of sidewalk conversation that a dozen separate bands of miners, led by Regulator deputies were combing the El Dorado highlands for miles in all directions from Placer Bar, with shoot-on-sight orders for the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk.

DELAYING long enough to buy some staple foodstuffs for his Indian partner, Wayne Morgan hurried back to where he had left his roan saddler. Then, loading his saddle-bags, Morgan tightened the latigo and headed back in to the mountains.

He had to ride with extreme caution, for there was plenty of fresh sign on the trails leading to outlying mining claims in the backwoods, proof that Russ Pederson's dragnet of posse riders were engaged in El Dorado's greatest man-hunt.

Several times in the next hour, Morgan was forced into hiding as bands of heavily armed man-hunters passed on nearby trails. The news wafted to Morgan's ears that the Placer Bar Miners' Committee had doubled the reward for the Masked Rider's apprehension, dead or alive, while the Eagle Mining Syndicate had posted a $1,000 bonus for the rescue of their pay-roll clerk, Ed Channon, and the recovery of the Syndicate's pay-roll money.

Spurred by such bounty offers, every miner in the Placer Bar area was engaged in the man-hunt. But somewhere in the surrounding hills, Sam Eichner and his unknown accomplices must be in hiding. Perhaps already they had murdered Ed Channon and were divvying up the contents of the Syndicate's strong-box.

CHAPTER XII

Betty Noonan's Hunch

BLUE HAWK received his partner's report of the startling developments in Placer Bar with an Indian's characteristic gravity.

Squatting beside the Yaqui while Blue Hawk devoured the food Morgan had brought him, the cowboy traced idle designs in the sand with a forefinger.

"Only one thing is clear, in this mixed-up puzzle," Morgan said. "Our job ain't finished here in California. It's probably only begun, Hawk. A pay-roll robbery has been chalked up against us, to say nothing of the danger Ed Channon may be in, grantin' that Eichner hasn't already murdered him."

The Indian nodded thoughtfully.

"We have little to go on," he acknowledged. "Do you have any ideas, Senor?"

Wayne Morgan scowled, his hair-trigger brain wrestling with a vague scheme he had mulled over during his return trek from Placer Bar.

"Only the faintest shadow of a hunch, Hawk. Yuh remember how Gus Asplund whispered somethin' to Sam Eichner, at yesterday's court trial?"

Blue Hawk frowned in recollection.

"*Si.* What he told Eichner, we do not know. He told the marshal it was something about collecting the reward on the Masked Rider. That sounded far-fetched at the time, Senor."

"Somethin' else has occurred to me," Wayne Morgan said. "Yuh remember what Eichner burst out with, that caused that Syndicate engineer to jump up and whisper to Eichner?"

The Yaqui nodded. "I remember it as clearly as if Eichner's words were tattooed on my brain, Senor. Eichner said 'If August Mangells don't speak up and tell the truth, I'll spill the reason why I *am* in this gold camp.' Those were Eichner's exact words, *no es verdad?*"

Wayne Morgan jumped to his feet, pounding a locked fist in his palm.

"Yes! That means August Mangells has some connection with Eichner, and his plot to steal that pay-roll. In the excitement of the death sentence, the court failed to put any importance on Sam Eichner's outburst. But in view of what's happened, I got a hunch what Asplund did whisper in Eichner's ear. I'll bet he bought Eichner's silence by tellin' him they would pull a jail break before the law could hang Sam Eichner!"

Striding back through the trees to where they had left their horses, the Robin Hood outlaw returned to Blue Hawk's side a few minutes later, again wearing his famed Masked Rider costume.

"Mangells has a gold mine—the Butterfly—on Granite Creek somewheres," the Masked Rider said. "We're in the general direction of Granite Creek now, Hawk. Just on a hunch, let's try and locate the Butterfly Mine. If August Mangells is there, we'll see what we can do to persuade him to tell what he knows about Eichner!"

Mounted on his sleek black stallion, the Masked Rider rode out of their secluded camp a few minutes later, with Blue Hawk trailing him aboard the pinto.

Their knowledge of the immediate terrain was scant, but Morgan had learned back in Placer Bar that morning the general location of August Mangells' g o l d m i n e on Granite Creek. If they rode west long enough, sooner or later they would intersect the Granite Creek gorge. Then they could ride its length, in the direction of Roaring River, until they spotted Mangells' diggings.

THEY were squinting into the westering sun rays, riding along a game trail at a trot in order to reach Granite Creek before darkness prevented further travel, when they were suddenly challenged by a piercing voice from the trailside brush dead ahead.

"Get your arms up! I've got you covered with a shotgun!"

The Masked Rider checked his instinctive motion to whip back his black cloak to clear his six-gun butts. He groped his arms aloft before the menace of the ambusher's command, Blue Hawk following suit.

The manzanitas parted, to reveal a slim rider aboard a flaxen-tailed palomino.

It ws Betty Noonan!

The sunlight painted a halo in the girl's blond tresses, but the charm of her beauty was nullified by the menace of the double-barreled scattergun she held pressed to her cheek, the twin bores weaving between the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk.

Dogged resolution made fire snap from Betty Noonan's eyes, and the bayed outlaws knew the slightest false move would cause the girl to shoot.

"Miss Noonan!" exclaimed the Masked Rider. "Yuh're makin' a mistake. Hawk and I ain't—"

The Masked Rider broke off as he saw the girl thumb back the double triggers of the shotgun.

"I'll do the talking!" she snapped defiantly. "What have you done with Ed Channon?"

Keeping his arms rigidly aloft, the Masked Rider started talking. He saw her hostility fade and flare up again, then gradually subside as he outlined the events of the night before. He veiled in secrecy but one angle of his activities that day, the fact that he had done his scouting in Placer Bar in broad daylight, in the guise of Wayne Morgan.

"That's the solemn, gospel truth, Miss Noonan!" the Robin Hood outlaw finished sincerely. "Hawk and me could just as well be headin' for parts unknown at this moment, but we are runnin' down a hunch regardin' Sam Eichner's whereabouts."

Tears hovered on the girl's lashes as she eased down her gunhammers and rested the shotgun butt on the swellfork pommel of her saddle, the barrel pointing skyward.

"I—I don't know why I believe everything you tell me, Masked Rider," Betty Noonan choked out. "But I do. Even as Ed Channon did, when he opened that safe in front of you the other night. After all, I suppose you could have stolen the payroll then, just as easily as—"

The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk lowered their aching arms in relief, as they saw a smile relax the girl's grief-stricken face.

"We was headin' for August Mangells' mining claim on Granite Creek," the Masked Rider explained. "We thought mebbe—"

"Yes!" exclaimed the girl, reining her palomino forward to halt beside the Masked Rider's stirrup. "That was exactly the thing I was doing. That was why I was at this spot, and saw you coming down this trail with the sun in your eyes. I believe Gus Asplund and Mangells are working in cahoots with Sam Eichner. I was heading for the Butterfly Mine to see what I could find out."

The Masked Rider gathered up his reins.

"Mangells' diggin's are in this neighborhood, then? Could yuh lead us to the Butterfly claim, Miss Noonan!"

BETTY thrust her shotgun into a boot under the saddle rosadero and reined around.

"Yes. We're less than two miles from Mangells' shafthouse now. If we hurry we can make it before dark catches us."

Three abreast on the winding deer trail, the two outlaws and the girl headed southwestward through the heavy timber. Finally to their ears came the whisper of a mountain torrent sluicing over its rocky bed.

Just as the fiery globe of the sun was rimming the Sierra Nevada peaks, Betty Noonan spurred into the lead and left the trail, riding off into the undergrowth. Lifting a finger to her lips for caution, the girl dismounted and beckoned for the two mystery riders to follow.

A short trip through the brush, and the trio came out on the rim of Granite Creek's defile. Squinting into the sunset glow, the girl pointed down the slope below them.

Heaps of mine tailings from Gold Rush days made a scar on the canyon slope below. The weather-beaten roof and walls on an ancient shafthouse marked the opening of a mining claim.

"The Butterfly," Betty Noonan whispered. "It's almost impossible to reach, except by following the trail up the canyon from Roaring River. The trail cuts off from the Bulletin Board Tree where you rescued me from Sam Eichner the other day."

The Masked Rider loosened six-guns in holsters.

"The diggin's sound deserted," he commented. "Hawk, you wait here with Miss Betty. I'll go down for a look-see. If August Mangells is down there, I'll call up to yuh."

The Masked Rider started down the roof-steep slope, lowering himself from bush to bush, his black costume making him almost invisible to his waiting companions as dusk followed swiftly on the sun's setting.

Midway down the slope, the Masked Rider had to follow a ledge to the leftward, to avoid jumping over a short cliff. In so doing, he swung in view of the grass-grown muck heaps below the Butterfly shafthouse, and had a glimpse of the winding ribbon of trail which led to Mangells' claim.

The Masked Rider's heart thumped with excitement as he saw a group of saddle horses tied to the rotting wooden supports of a big blasting screen, erected by Mangells to protect his shaft house from flying débris when he set off blasts in the mountain side.

The Butterfly was not deserted, then!

Twilight had deepened to distilled indigo by the time the black-clad Robin Hood outlaw reached the level of the shafthouse roof and began picking his way down a gentle slope toward the spot where the horses had been tied. He was slipping like a phantom toward the shafthouse wall when his scalp suddenly crawled before the stimulus of a high-pitched scream of agony, issuing out of the shafthouse—the scream of a man in mortal suffering.

Palming a six-gun, the Masked Rider slithered through the gathering darkness and reached a glassless window in the shafthouse wall. Even as he peered inside the building, he saw a match flicker as flame was applied to the wick of a kerosene lantern. The light spread in brilliance, unfolded a grim scene before the Masked Rider's eyes.

A GROUP of sombreroed, hairy-jawed men were grouped about one of their number, who was hanging the lantern to a nail driven in a heavy beam which supported the windlass drum of the Butterfly's shaft elevator.

One of the group the Masked Rider recognized—Gus Asplund, the traitorous engineer from the Eagle Syndicate mills back in Placer Bar. Another lantern-jawed man in a gambler's broadcloth coat and flat-brimmed Stetson, the Masked Rider recalled having seen at the kangaroo

court trial the day before.

Then, shifting his gaze to the opposite side of the yawning shaft, the Masked Rider recognized Sam Eichner, standing beside a big, mackinaw-clad miner with a scrubby red beard. The two held frayed and blood-stained ropes, with knots at the ends, and they were staring upward at a swaying figure, naked to the waist, hanging over the open mine shaft from a rope tied to a cross-beam above.

"Are yuh goin' to give us that combination, or do we have to larrup the meat off'n yore bones, feller?" roared Sam Eichner. "I'm gettin' tired of yore stallin'!"

Nausea stabbed at the Masked Rider as the swinging victim turned slowly like a quarter of beef. The half-naked man, his back crisscrossed with a web of bleeding welts from the horse-whipping he was receiving, was Betty Noonan's fiancé—the Placer Bar pay-roll clerk, Ed Channon!

CHAPTER XIII

Plan for Rescue

CHANNON'S face was slick with sweat and grime and blood. His jaws were clamped tight, his eyes were misted cups in their sockets, and were lackluster with suffering.

The Masked Rider winced guiltily as he saw that Channon's legs were still bound with the ropes he himself had put there, back at the Placer Bar jailhouse. The man was hanging by his wrists, and his muscle-corded arms were latticed with blue-green welts where the knotted ropes had lashed the flesh.

"Give us the info on how to open that safe," repeated Sam Eichner, drawing a crimson-smeared rope through one hamlike fist, "or we'll have to stop this whuppin' and try some other kind of torture. Shavin' the soles off'n yore feet, mebbe, or burnin' splinters under yore skin."

The Masked Rider saw Ed Channon's body racked by a shudder. His eyelids flickered open, and a bright gleam of defiance was in them as he chewed out feebly:

"You and Mangells can whip me to death, Eichner. I haven't—got a chance, nohow. At least I'll—pass out knowin'—you didn't get your swag. Try opening that safe—with dynamite—and you'll blow that pay-roll—to smithereens."

Sam Eichner exchanged glances with the red-whiskered giant who was helping whip the prisoner—a man the Masked Rider knew to be August Mangells, if he judged Channon's statement aright.

"Give him a few more licks, Mangells," growled Eichner. "If a rope won't make him talk, we'll get a chunk of wire cable off'n that old windlass drum. Or mebbe a bit of halter chain."

The Masked Rider drew his other six-gun, twirled the cylinder with his thumb. Behind the domino mask, his eyes were shuttling over the torture scene within, as he saw August Mangells draw back an iron-sinewed arm to drive his rope lash into their victim's quivering, lacerated back.

He was facing four-to-one odds—Eichner, Mangells, Asplund, and the stranger dressed like a gambling man. All were packing six-guns.

Yet there was no time to summon Blue Hawk down from the rim of Granite Creek, to catch the outlaws between a cross fire when show-down came. A dozen more blows of the whip, and Ed Channon's staunch heart might give out. He had already endured hours of torture, enough to kill an ordinary man. But to the last, Betty Noonan's fiancée was clinging stubbornly to his resolve not to yield his secret.

Cr-rack! The knotted rope in Man-

gells' fist coiled around Channon's swaying body like a snake, and a grown of pain issued from the pay-roll clerk's clamped lips, a cry which no amount of physical courage could stem.

The Masked Rider stepped up on a horizontal plank resting on the ground below the shafthouse window, and slid his Colts across the window sill. One gun was aimed at Mangells and Eichner, the other across the shaft opening at the gambler and Gus Asplund.

"I ain't—talkin," yelled Channon, his body convulsed with pain. "I'll see you skunks to the devil first!"

The Masked Rider opened his mouth with the intention of calling for show-down. In the back of his mind, he had resolved to trigger a bullet into Sam Eichner and the traitorous Gus Asplund, before a bullet caught him in return.

BUT fate intervened against the Masked Rider.

With a sodden crunch of snapping fibers, the decayed plank broke under the Robin Hood outlaw's weight, plunging him fifteen inches to the ground and dragging his six-guns off the window sill.

He crouched there, holding his breath in suspense, an eye glued to a crack in the shafthouse boards as he saw the four outlaws whirl about, staring around them with alarm in their eyes.

"What was that noise?" demanded Eichner, hand plummeting to Colt butt.

"Sounded like a timber bustin' in two!" quavered Gus Asplund. "Yuh suppose the Regulators have—"

"Douse the light, Henderson!" commanded Mangells, a six-gun leaping to his fist. "Let's go outside for a look-see, Eichner."

The Masked Rider saw the broadcloth-coated gambler snatch down the lantern, jack open the soot-smeared chimney, and blow flame from the wick to plunge the shafthouse in total darkness. Flattening his back against the shafthouse wall, the Masked Rider waited tensely as he saw Mangells and Eichner appear outside the mine building, dark blots against the foaming white rapids of Granite Creek.

Going in opposite directions, the owlhoot pair made a circuit of the shafthouse. One of them—in the darkness the Masked Rider was unable to identify the stalker—passed within a dozen feet of the Robin Hood outlaw.

The Masked Rider's fingers itched on triggers, but he knew that to force a premature show-down, with his enemy forces in two bunches, would be to seal Ed Channon's doom. The first thing the killers would do, in the event they suspected a trap was about to close on the Butterfly diggings, would be to riddle the pay-roll clerk with lead and leave his corpse dangling over the mine shaft.

Mangells and Eichner met in front of the shafthouse and the Masked Rider heard them conversing in low tones.

"Nobody around," Eichner grunted. "We musta imagined we heard that noise. Or else mebbe one of the hosses stomped on a rotten chunk of lumber."

The two reconnoiterers returned inside the shafthouse, and John Henderson relit the lantern. Peering through a convenient knothole, the Masked Rider saw that Ed Channon was limp, head drooping on his chest, body twisting slowly from the ropes which held him above the black maw of the Butterfly's main shaft.

For a horrified instant the Masked Rider believed that he had arrived too late, that Betty Noonan's husband-to-be was dead as a result of his beating. Then he saw the man's ribs lifting and falling.

"Channon's passed out cold," grumbled Asplund. "Want I should go

down to the river and fetch back a bucket of cold water to douse him with, Boss?"

Sam Eichner's beady eyes continued to flit about the shadowy interior of the mining structure. He ignored Asplund's query.

"That noise we heard—I don't like it!" snarled the outlaw, seating himself on a black, glittering object which the Masked Rider saw was the Eagle Mining Syndicate's safe. "Mebbe my nerves is rubbed raw from my night in jail, but—"

MANGELLS, owner of the diggings, interrupted the Hornitas gunhawk.

"It don't seem possible, but somebody mighta sneaked into our Number Two cross-cut, out on the hillside" Mangells suggested. "That tunnel connects with the main shaft, about thirty feet below the floor here. I'll go take a look. That noise of a breakin' board mighta come from a shorin' timber bein' knocked over, down below."

Their victim unconscious for the time being, the outlaws seated themselves on the shaft combing and began rolling cigarettes. August Mangells, picking up a shotgun on his way out of the shafthouse, headed diagonally up the east slope of Granite Creek gulch.

Out of hiding the Masked Rider slipped, tracing Mangells' progress through the brush by sound alone. If he could overtake the mine owner and knock him out with a swift blow from behind, he would have whittled the odds down to three against one. And he believed that Mangells alone was more of a menace than Gus Asplund and John Henderson put together.

A lopsided moon, two days on the wane, cruised out over the edge of the pines like a fat apricot in a tub of ink. The eerie witch-glow gave the Masked Rider a glimpse of August Mangells, as the beefy mine owner made his way to a sprawl of rubble which spewed from a tunnel mouth in the canyon wall, some fifty yards from the shafthouse.

Skulking noiselessly through the brush, the Masked Rider approached within a dozen yards of the entrance to Number Two cross-cut. There, August Mangells was inspecting the muck heap at the tunnel's entrance.

Convinced that no one had entered the cut recently, Mangells headed down toward the river—and the Masked Rider realized that his chances of waylaying the outlaw had gone glimmering. A warning from ambush would probably result in Mangells breaking into flight, which would tip off the three killers in the shafthouse.

But at sight of the Number Two tunnel, the Masked Rider got an idea. According to what Mangells had told his henchmen, the cross-cut connected with the main shaft, over which Ed Channon's body was dangling.

Ducking into the tunnel, the Masked Rider worked his way along the subterranean passage, groping through inky blackness. The tunnel curved leftward at an oblique angle and, rounding the elbow bend, the Masked Rider saw a faint wash of light at its end. Lantern light, shafting down from the windlass house above ground.

The light enabled the Masked Rider to pick his way through a forest of rough-hewn shoring timbers, draped with cobwebs. The tunnel was floored with rock chips from the pickaxes of the original 1849 Argonauts who had sunk the Butterfly claim.

A few minutes later the black-clad outlaw had reached the brink of the main vertical shaft. Gripping a supporting timber, he leaned out over the edge and peered upward.

Thirty feet overhead he saw the foreshortened body of Ed Channon, twisting slowly from his rope supports. The lantern glow silhouetted

Gus Asplund and the gambler in the Prince Albert coat, who were sitting on the windlass combing, their legs dangling over the edge of the shaft while they puffed cigarettes.

ACROSS the shaft, some ten feet away, was the continuation of the Number Two cross-cut, which had followed a sub-surface vein of gold ore. The main shaft itself was probably hundreds of feet deep. Vertical cables for the elevator car vanished into the subterranean well, their wire strands frayed and rusty with age.

An idea crystalized full-born in the Masked Rider's brain, as he retraced his steps back to the moonlit canyon. Then, instead of going back to the shafthouse, he started scaling the slope.

Five minutes later his soft call was answered by Blue Hawk and Betty Noonan. The Masked Rider found the girl beside herself with suspense, keeping an iron grip on her emotions to keep from breaking down.

"That—that awful scream we heard!" she choked. "That was my Eddie! They're torturing him down there."

The Masked Rider pressed the girl's ice-cold hands between his own.

"Yes," he admitted bluntly. "Yuh might as well know the truth. Sam Eichner and three of his pards are down there, tryin' to get Channon to tell 'em how to open that pay-roll safe. But I'm here to testify, Miss Noonan, yuh've got a real man in Ed Channon. His nerve hasn't cracked, and I don't think it will."

Speaking swiftly, the Masked Rider went on to outline the plan which had come to him in the depths of the Butterfly cross-cut. When he had finished, Blue Hawk and the girl nodded eagerly.

"Let's get goin', then," the Robin Hood outlaw said to his Yaqui companion. "We've got to work fast, before Ed recovers consciousness and they start whippin' him again. You stay here with our hosses, Miss Betty."

The girl shook her head determinedly.

"No—no Ed is the man I love. I've got to help him!"

An argument would cause delay, and the Masked Rider recognized a woman whose mind was fully made up. Without comment, the mystery rider headed down the slope, followed by his two companions.

Guided by the brilliant moonlight, they made the descent in half the time it had orginally taken the Masked Rider to reach the foot of the canyon. Then, ordering Betty Noonan to remain behind at the mouth of Number Two cross-cut, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk made their way over to where the outlaws' horses were tied.

Rolls of heavy wire netting littered the ground, a thick rusty mesh which was used for shielding miners from

[*Turn page*]

flying rocks after dynamite shots. Picking up two rolls of the netting, the Masked Rider paused long enough to remove four coiled lariats from the saddles of the outlaws' ponies.

Then the two headed back to where Betty Noonan was waiting for them, to work out the preliminary details of the Masked Rider's plan to rescue Ed Channon.

Once the maltreated pay-roll clerk had been removed from danger, there would be time enough for a six-gun show-down with Sam Eichner and his three henchmen.

CHAPTER XIV

Fall of Doom

UNTIL they had reached the main shaft they worked their way back into the horizontal tunnel. Betty Noonan went chalk-white as she peered upward and saw her lover's whiplashed form dangling over the shaft.

None of the four outlaws were in sight, but the murmur of their voices was plainly heard by the three accomplices thirty feet below.

Dim rays of lantern light revealed heavy snubbing timbers on the other side of the shaft, with matching posts set in the tunnel floor where they stood. When the Butterfly Mine had been in operation, the posts had been used to lash down the elevator car when it stopped to load ore from the Number Two cross-cut.

Shaking out a loop in one of the lariats he had brought along, the Masked Rider lassoed one of the snubbing posts opposite, and drew the rope taut, dallying it around a post at his side and knotting it securely. He did the same thing with three more ropes, criss-crossing them to form a sort of rope platform spanning the vertical shaft.

Then, without so much as a whispered order, the Masked Rider directed the unrolling of the heavy iron screen. By sliding the wire netting out over the horizontal ropes, they were able to push the webwork of twisted steel wire across to the opposite mouth of the cross-cut.

That done, Blue Hawk and the Masked Rider drew their hunting knives and cut off the slack ends of the four lariats. Cutting the hard-twist manila lass'-ropes into foot-long sections, they proceeded to lash down the edges of the wire netting to the supporting ropes, crawling on all fours out on the double layer of metal screen.

Betty Noonan watched in breath-held suspense as she saw that the make-shift platform was supporting the weight of the two outlaws. Reaching the other side of the tunnel, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk used up the remainder of their rope in tying the screen platform to the elevator cables and to the two criss-cross lariats which made an X from corner to corner.

On their way back to where Betty Noonan was waiting, the Masked Rider and his Indian partner walked upright, testing the impromptu platform. It sagged springily, but was amply strong to support them.

"Sta bueno," whispered the Robin Hood outlaw, as they withdrew back into the cross-cut passage. "That wire screen is strong enough to hold flying rocks from dynamite explosions, and the lariats which support the screen won't break when a two-thousand-pound steer hits the dead end of a dallied reata. So I reckon it'll hold Ed Channon and me."

Betty Noonan gripped the Masked Rider's hands in the darkness.

"Good luck," she whispered. "Blue Hawk and I will be waiting, and praying for your success."

Hurrying back into the moonlight reaches of Granite Creek Canyon, the

Masked Rider retraced his steps to the shafthouse.

Peering through the window where he had originally spied on Ed Channon's torture, the outlaw saw that the pay-roll clerk had recovered consciousness, with the aid of river water which Gus Asplund had thrown on his half-naked body by bucketsful.

"We're givin' yuh one more chance, Channon!" grated Sam Eichner. "If yuh won't talk this time, we're cuttin' that rope and lettin' yuh drop, like we said we would. And it's seven hundred feet to the bottom of that shaft, Mangells says—with a hundred feet of seepage water for yuh to drown in, if the fall don't kill yuh. So think it over, Channon."

HIS lungs heaving like a hooked trout's gills, Ed Channon stared at his evil-visaged tormenters. His lips twisted in a feeble grin of defiance.

"I'll take—the combination of that safe with me!" he wheezed. "So go ahead—and do your worst—you spineless hyenas!"

The Masked Rider waited to hear no more. Skirting the wall of the shafthouse, he drew his twin Peacemakers as he reached the front door of the building and climbed up on the sloping ramp which led to the windlass platform.

Halting in the threshold, the Masked Rider paused a second to photograph the location of the four outlaws in his memory. All had their backs to him, and were staring at Sam Eichner as the fiendish killer-wolf drew back his arm to send another lash coiling about their prisoner's flesh.

Lifting one gun, the Masked Rider drew a rock-steady bead on the lantern which swung from a cross-beam over the outlaw's heads.

The Colt .45 roared deafeningly and recoiled against the heel of the Masked Rider's hand. Glass jangled as the bullet smashed the lamp, and the shafthouse was plunged into total darkness.

Gliding forward and to the left, the Masked Rider skirted the windlass enengine and came to a halt alongside the shaft combing, opposite where the four outlaws were frozen, for the moment, in petrified horror.

Then bedlam broke loose, accompanied by the slog of boots and the scrape of guns leaving leather. Shouts dinned the Masked Rider's ear-drums. He saw the four outlaws blacking out the wisps of moonlight streaming through bald spots in the lofty roof, as Eichner and his men leaped for the shelter of corners, convinced that they were in for a shoot-out.

Moonbeams penciled down on the elevated windlass drum, and revealed Ed Channon's position, hanging over the shaft.

Stepping back a few paces to get momentum for his leap, the Masked Rider holstered his six-guns and drew a bowie knife from his belt sheath placing it securely between his teeth. Then, with his black cloak bannering behind him, the Robin Hood outlaw vaulted out into space and his upreaching arms clamped about Ed Channon's neck in a bear hug.

Their two bodies swayed like a pendulum as the Masked Rider, with a whispered word in the pay-roll clerk's ear, got a firm grip on the rope which was knotted to Channon's wrists. Then, whipping the razor-honed knife from his teeth with one hand, gripping the rope with the other, the Masked Rider slashed the blade savagely against the hempen fibers, six inches above Channon's wrists.

"Over the shaft!" came August Mangells' booming voice from the darkness of a far corner. "I see a knife flashin'. Somebody's cuttin' down Ed Channon!"

Guns stabbed the night with flicking tongues of fire, but the Masked Rider's keen blade severed the rope

and the two men plummeted out of sight into the shaft, a split instant before the salvo of outlaw lead ripped the spot where Ed Channon had been dangling.

STRAIGHT down into the bowels of the mine the two men hurtled, the steel elevator cables whistling inches from their heads. The falling men landed on the Masked Rider's sturdy rope-and-mesh platform at the level of Crosscut Number Two and, like trapeze acrobats landing in a circus safety net, they bounced skyward, to land on their backs once more on the invisible netting stretched across the shaft well.

Blue Hawk crawled out on the bouncing platform to help the Masked Rider pull Ed Channon's insensible form to the safety of the tunnel's rock floor.

"It worked—thank God, it worked!" choked Betty Noonan in a sobbing whisper. "Eddie's alive—he's alive! I can feel his heart—it's beating strongly."

Pulling the girl aside, the two outlaws picked up Channon's limp form after cutting his wrists and legs free of their bonds. Then, as rapidly as they could through the darkness of the tunnel, they carried Ed Channon out into the moonlight.

"We'll leave him with you, Miss Betty!" the Masked Rider whispered. "Blue Hawk and I have work to do."

Like twin phantoms in the spectral moonlight, the justice riders headed for the shafthouse. Midway to the building, they ducked into the shelter of a rock maple clump, as they saw the quartet of outlaws had left the shafthouse and were deploying up and down the river bank, guns agleam in the moon rays.

"We've got to wait until they're all together in one bunch before we call for show-down, Hawk," whispered the Robin Hood outlaw. "They're out makin' shore the Regulators haven't surrounded the Butterfly."

Five minutes later, a call from Sam Eichner brought the other three outlaws back to the moonlit stretch of ground in front of the shafthouse.

"We got nothin' to worry about, men!" Eichner's voice reached the ambushed pair in the rock maple motte. "Whoever that was that shot out the light and tried to rescue Ed Channon, has cooked his own goose. Committed suicide by fallin' down that shaft."

Harsh laughter, with a nervous ring in it, echoed Eichner's announcement.

"Channon's done for, yeah," Gus Asplund's nasal voice raised in complaint. "We'll never get that safe open now that he's gone. We dasn't blow it open with Mangells' blastin' powder, with that strong-box loaded with dynamite."

Eichner hitched his gun-belts determinedly.

"There's ways to skin a cat, if yuh use yore brains," the outlaw chief snapped gruffly. "Asplund, you got plenty of tools at yore machine shop in Placer Bar, ain't yuh?"

"Yeah," answered the Syndicate engineer.

"Then yuh're goin' back to town and bring us a steel-drillin' bit," Eichner said. "We'll bore a hole in that safe if it takes us all day tomorrer. Then we'll sink the safe out in Granite Creek yonder, and let the water soak up that dynamite and spile it. Once that's done, we can blow off the door—and the greenbacks are as good as our'n!"

A BUZZ of comment followed Eichner's suggestion, in voices pitched too low for the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk to hear. Finally Gus Asplund, identified in the moonlight by the bandage which turbaned his head, left the group and mounted one of the waiting horses. The Syndicate engineer was headed off down the

Granite Creek trail, and the three outlaws returned to the shafthouse.

"We can take our time, Hawk," the Masked Rider whispered. "Asplund won't be back with that drillin' equipment before dawn. Meanwhile, we've got to get Ed Channon and the girl away from here, on one pretext or another. Channon might get ringy and try to horn in when the bullets start flyin'."

Returning to the mouth of Crosscut Number Two, the outlaws found Channon and the girl clinging close together. Ed Channon having recovered his senses to find to find himself in the arms of his bride-to-be.

"Channon needs lookin' over by a medico, Miss Betty," the Masked Rider said, after he had explained that Eichner, Mangells and Henderson had decided to wait until Gus Asplund returned from Placer Bar before attempting to open the Syndicate safe. "Yuh'd better take him back to Placer Bar, and you might tell Marshal Russ Pederson about what's goin' on up here. We'll make shore that Sam Eichner and his partners are still at the Butterfly Mine when the law gets up here."

Ed Channon grinned wryly.

"Tryin' to cut me out of the fun when the fireworks start, eh?" he inquired weakly. "Well, I don't need no sawbones. I'm the bucko who got horsewhipped, and I aim to notch my gunsights on Eichner and Mangells when the time comes."

Betty Noonan gasped as he wilted in her arms, his voice trailing out into a gusty sigh.

"He's just passed out again," the Masked Rider hastened to reassure the girl. "Yuh can see he needs a doctor."

Channon had revived by the time Blue Hawk and the Masked Rider had carried him to the rim-rock and placed him aboard Betty Noonan's palamino. This time he made no protest as the girl swung up behind him, to support him in saddle.

"Yuh'd better keep to the ridge trail on yore way back to Placer Bar," warned the Robin Hood outlaw. "Yuh don't want to risk runnin' into Gus Asplund on the Roarin' River route."

The girl nodded, gathering up her reins.

"I know my way through these mountains," she reassured the two men who had saved Channon. "We'll be back with Marshal Pederson and a posse. And be sure you don't run any foolhardy risks, now."

After the girl and her half-conscious fiancé had ridden off through the moonlight forest, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk returned to their horses, where the Indian took his chokeberry hunting bow and quiver of arrows from behind the pinto's cantle. When there were prospects of hand-to-hand combat in the offing, Blue Hawk invariably chose the primitive weapons of his ancestors, which were as deadly in the Yaqui's hands as the six-guns of the Masked Rider in his hands.

They were forced to remain in the rim-rock brush. Eichner and his two henchmen were outdoors once more, dragging the heavy safe down to the edge of Granite Creek where it would be ready for immersing after Gus Asplund had sieved it with holes.

As long as the trio of killers remained in the open, it would be suicidal for the Masked Rider and the Yaqui to risk descending the canyon wall in the full moonlight.

"THEY figger they're safe here at the Butterfly," grunted the Masked Rider, settling himself on his haunches. "Now that Channon and the girl are out of the way, I'd just as soon wait for Gus Asplund to get back, anyway. Then we'll have all four pigs in the same poke."

But Gus Asplund returned to the Butterfly Mine prematurely, and he brought with him a startling reversal

in the trend of the impending showdown.

A half hour later, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk were appalled to see the Syndicate engineer ride up the Granite Creek trail, hailing his three *companeros* as he approached. And with Asplund was a big palomino, carrying double. The riders were Ed Channon and Betty Noonan, and they were being driven forward under the menace of Gus Asplund's six-guns!

CHAPTER XV

Doom at Daybreak

ED CHANNON'S being in the saddle of Betty Noonan's mount was little short of seeing a ghost for the three outlaws striding forward to meet Asplund and his prisoners.

Had they not lit matches and seen the mute testimony of the knife-slashed rope dangling over the Butterfly Mine shaft? And had not August Mangells testified that the shaft was over seven hundred feet deep, without a single obstruction to block Channon's fall?

"In the name of forty-seven devils, Asplund!" choked John Henderson, the first to recover his wits. "Yuh haven't had time to get back to Placer Bar. And yuh—"

Asplund leaped from stirrups and grinned toothily in the moonlight.

"I didn't even reach the Bulletin Board Tree," the engineer said. "Mighty near run into Marshal Russ Pederson and ten-twelve of his Regulators, headin' up Granite Creek."

Looks of dismay crossed the faces of Eichner and his men.

"I lit a shuck for the Ridge Road," Asplund hurried on, "thinkin' I'd get back to town thataway. And danged if I didn't run smack into Channon and the girl, so I toted 'em back. I figger Channon'll be glad to open that safe now, to save his school-ma'rm—and we'll be out of here before Pederson's posse shows up at the Butterfly."

Henderson and Mangells came forward to haul the pay-roll clerk and Betty Noonan out of saddle. They noted that Gus Asplund had taken the precaution to knot the girl's arms behind her back with rawhide thongs cut from her saddle skirts. Channon, on the verge of collapse as a result of his grueling ordeal under the outlaw's whips, was in no need of roping up.

"Them Regulators—how close are they?" demanded Eichner. "Mebbe we better load the safe ag'in and head for the back country."

Asplund shook his head.

"Waste too much time doin' that. Besides, Channon's ready to shell up the dope about that safe, Eichner. Ask him."

Channon, a pitiful ruin of a man as he swayed in the clutches of Henderson and Mangells, nodded weakly.

"You—win," he croaked. "Promise—not to lay a hand—on Miss Noonan—and I'll open that safe."

Grinning exultantly, Sam Eichner led the tottering pay-roll clerk over to where the safe was resting on the river bank. The threat of disaster to his betrothed had wrung from Channon the defeat which no amount of physical torture could have done.

Sinking to his knees before the Eagle Mining Syndicate's strong-box, Channon clutched the nickeled combination dial and began twirling it through the combination numbers, his hands quivering as if from palsy. Betty Noonan stifled a sob as she saw Channon slump back, watching with pain-dulled eyes as Sam Eichner cuffed him aside and jerked on the safe door handle.

The thick, laminated steel door swung open, and out on the ground at Eichner's feet tumbled three bun-

dles of dynamite sticks, bound together with twine.

"Inside—that bundle—you'll find—them greenbacks," Channon managed, lurching forward as if unsteady in his attempt to ride to his feet.

In so doing, the pay-roll clerk shut the safe door. Leaning against the safe, Channon's shaking hand reached down behind his body to give the combination dial a surreptitious twist.

"Now can Miss Noonan and I—leave?"

SNATCHING up the bundle of explosives which Channon had indicated, Sam Eichner threw back his head and guffawed harshly.

"We're puttin' a slug in yore brisket. Channon, and we're polishin' off yore little school-teacher in the bargain," snarled the outlaw. "By the time that marshal gets here with his blasted Regulators, we'll be back in the tall timber—and all he'll find will be you and the filly. They can puzzle out what in—"

A gunshot blasted the night at that moment, from the direction of the Butterfly shafthouse. And a bullet clipped the flop-brimmed Stetson from Sam Eichner's head!

"Reach, the lot of yuh!" came a sinister yell across the night. "We got yuh covered!"

Like puppets yanked by a single wire, the four outlaws whirled about to face the shafthouse. Betty Noonan was the first to recognize the stalking figures of two men who emerged into the light of the westering moon.

"The Masked Rider—and Blue Hawk!" she cried, running over to where Ed Channon was leaning against the safe, her arms free of Mangells' and Henderson's iron grasps. "Oh, Eddie!"

Raw inferno broke loose on the Butterfly claim, then.

With a berserk scream, Gus Asplund dug for leather and came up with a six-gun spurting flame. Suddenly the traitorous engineer from Placer Bar dropped his guns, to claw at the quivering Indian arrow which was imbedded in his ribs. Invisible in the moonlight, the iron-tipped shaft had sped from Blue Hawk's hunting bow to impale the gunhawk. Dead on his feet, Gus Asplund dropped in a twisted heap on the riverside trail.

August Mangells was in action, his six-gun roaring in a rataplan of blurring shots as he fanned the hammer of his Colt with the heel of his left palm, aiming at the crouched Yaqui who was notching another arrow to his bowstring.

Flame spat from the Masked Rider's twin .45s then, and the zipping slugs converged unerringly on the big mine owner, dropping him backward with blood gushing from a semicolon of bullet-holes punched between his eyes. Over and over, as limp as a bag of garbage, August Mangells rolled down the river bank to hit Granite Creek's ripples with a geysering splash.

Coming in at a run, the Masked Rider's flaming Colts cut down John Henderson even as the Placer Bar gambler emptied his sleeve derringers at the Robin Hood outlaw's zigzagging figure.

Through eddying gunsmoke, big Sam Eichner leaped to seize the reins of Gus Asplund's snorting pony. Protected by the horse's bulk against the Masked Rider's guns, Sam Eichner hit the saddle and dug in the hooks, to send the panic-stricken horse skyrocketing past Betty Noonan and Ed Channon, on his way down the Granite Canyon trail.

Even as he whipped up his Colts, the Masked Rider realized that the fleeing outlaw was out of range of his short guns.

But it was not in the cards for Sam Eichner to ride free of the death-ridden canyon. In the act of vanish-

ing into the trailside forest, Eichner reined up, as his avenue of retreat was cut off by a string of gaunt-faced riders approaching from the direction of Roaring River. In the vanguard of the file of Regulators was Marshal Russ Pederson, his law badge aflame in the first light of daybreak.

"THE Masked Rider!" bellowed the lawman, as he recognized the bullet-headed German who had escaped from his gold camp jail on the eve of his hanging. "We got the Masked Rider, men!"

Hugging the dynamite bundle under one elbow, Sam Eichner wheeled his horse broadside to the trail and pawed frantically for the six-gun riding his hip. Even as the gun swept up and leveled across the saddle-horn at the oncoming marshal, Russ Pederson's shotgun roared at point-blank range.

And then an amazing thing happened. The riddling buckshot caught Sam Eichner on the near side, peppering the dynamite sticks he was clutching to his ribs. The dawn was convulsed with cataclysmic sound, and the Regulators were rocked back in their saddles by the blast which wiped Sam Eichner off the face of the earth and reduced Asplund's pony to a mass of hashmeat on the trail.

"The money!" whispered Betty Noonan, her ears ringing with the concussion of the explosion. "We lost the pay-roll, after all!"

Somehow, Ed Channon found the strength to laugh.

"No, we didn't, darling!" he said. "I pointed out the wrong bundle. The *dinero's* still inside the safe. Eichner ran off with the wrong package of dynamite."

The two twisted their heads about to peer through the dense fog of dynamite smoke and dust and raining débris. They saw the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk racing off through the glare of sun-up, climbing the canyon wall to the spot where their horses awaited them on the edge of the timber.

By the time Marshal Russ Pederson and his Regulators had ridden out of the zone of smoke, the two mystery riders had vanished into the limbo of the El Dorado woods.

"What a story!" yelled Hazeltine, sinking on his knees beside the arrow-slain corpse of Gus Asplund. "I'll issue the first extra edition I ever printed, Russ, to let the minin' country know that yuh killed the Masked Rider! And that Injun musta downed Gus Asplund, here, from the looks of this arrer. . . ."

Hazeltine published an extra edition of the *Placer Bar Mining News,* all right. A copy of the newspaper wound up in a General Delivery pigeon-hole at the post office in Las Vegas, Nevada, addressed in Betty Noonan's writing to one Sam Jones.

Three weeks after the arrival of the paper, a handsome, clean-cut cowboy called at the post-office and inquired for Sam Jones' mail. But it was not until Wayne Morgan had returned to his secret camp out in the Nevada foothills that he opened the paper, and showed a marked headline to his saddle mate, Blue Hawk.

A banner headline which faced the two, read:

MASKED RIDER KILLED BY PLACER BAR MARSHAL! NOTED DESPERADO'S INDIAN PARTNER ESCAPES.

Lounging in the shade of a tepula tree, the Masked Rider listened while his educated Yaqui partner read Editor Hazeltine's flamboyant account of the dynamite showdown at Butterfly Mine. Blue Hawk read from the *Mining News:*

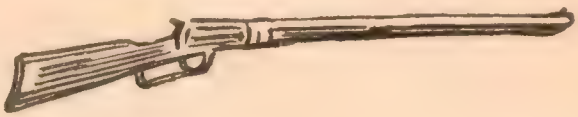
The sizable reward posted for the Masked Rider was turned over to Miss Betty Noonan by its rightful recipient, Marshal Russ Pederson. She is going to use it to build a schoolhouse for the children of our community. There was not enough left of the Masked Rider's corpse

to bury, as a result of the dynamite blast which ended the famous outlaw's nefarious career.

Placer Bar has been worried for fear it would lose its favorite school-teacher, but Miss Noonan, who is now Mrs. Edward Channon, following ceremonies performed by the local skypilot, assures the editor that she will continue to reside in Placer Bar, where her husband has been promoted to general manager of the vast Eagle Mining Syndicate, as a reward for saving a hundred-thousand-dollar pay-roll.

Blue Hawk turned to regard his grinning companion.

"For a man who has been blown to hashmeat," the Indian remarked, with one of his rare witticisms, "you look cool and—if you will forgive the pun, Senor—collected!"



Further Exciting Exploits of Wayne Morgan in

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By CHARLES N. HECKELMANN

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4. CLEAN BLADE in razor by loosening handle, then rinsing in hot water and shaking. Wiping the blade is likely to damage the edges

The Whittling Kid

By CLINTON DANGERFIELD

The Age of Miracles Returns When Cordy Smith and the Locked Horn Rannies Transform a Cedar Chest into Noah's Ark, and Battle the Flood for Justice!

THEIR drink-loosened voices came clearly to Cordy Smith, who was listening with fierce absorption. Two of Wolf Woggan's men they were, occupying a small alcove in the Yellow Owl saloon. One of them was mumbling thickly, in what he believed were low tones.

"Wolf wants the Cedar Chest. It belongs to a crippled cowboy they call the Whittlin' Kid. He lives in it."

"Man can't live in sheedar chesh, Zeke," objected his companion, reaching for the bottle. "'Cause I'm new here, yuh try stringin' me."

"The Cedar Chest is about fifteen feet long and six or seven wide. Before old Job Woggan, Wolf's grandfather, found gold he made that Cedar Chest, double-walled, double-floored, tight as a drum. He lived in it 'til he struck it rich. Then he gave it to the Whittlin' Kid. 'Gimme that bottle. I'll pour for yuh. Yuh're so far gone, it don't go in the glass."

"Yuh're jesh as bad, only yuh talk fashter. I know Job Woggan's dead as doornails, but Wolf's his grandson, and I'm goin' to ride for Wolf. Why's Wolf want that Sheedar Chesh, anyhow?"

"Reckon he really wants to get the Whittlin' Kid off his land."

"Then sho do I. We'll kick the Whittlin' Kid into river."

Talky Tally, sitting with Cordy Smith, saw him stiffen with anger, watched his eyes narrow, and grim lines harden his mouth; but he listened in menacing silence.

"Wolf's doin' it legal," Zeke continued. "He claims the Whittlin' Kid owes him twelve months back rent, ground and water. So he's notifyin' the Kid of foreclosure at noon. The Kid'll be toted off to the poorhouse along with his whittlin's."

Talky Tally studied Cordy's face. Talky knew that before the Whittling Kid had been thrown by a bronc, he'd been the gayest of companions for Cordy Smith. Stirrup to stirrup, the Kid had been, at twenty-two, a good man to ride the river with.

Cordy himself was thirty—a dangerous man not only because of his cool courage but because in emergencies he thought swiftly, resourcefully.

He visited the Cedar Chest as often as he could, and he and the Kid would talk over old times together. Talky had heard him say often that the Kid had grown to love his little old Cedar Chest.

There, the Kid shaped cowboys and ponies in wood. A half breed called for them and sold them in town to a tourists' curiosity shop, bringing back purchases for the Kid.

WHILE the two men in the Yellow Owl were discussing his fate, the Kid was diligently whittling out a horse and rider. His thin face was bent keenly over his work. The rider he was fashioning was intended to represent Cordy Smith. Cordy, the Kid believed was on trail, and the figure would be a gift to him on his return.

The Kid's Chihuahua dog, given

The moment Woggan's pack swept close enough, the Locked Horns fired steadily

him by the girl he'd once hoped to marry, watched him with nervous pop eyes. The Kid grinned at him.

"You're a no-account dog, Halfpint, and I'm a no-account feller. Wish I was a snail and could carry my house on my back, we'd get off Wolf's spread. You—"

The ugly little Chihuahua suddenly exploded into shrill, angry barks. The Whittling Kid laid down his work, reached for his crutch, hobbled to his one door and opened it.

Wolf Woggan, a rough-hewn, harsh-faced man of forty, riding a big bay, loped up to the door, his greenish-gray eyes burning on the slim figure fronting him.

"Lo, Merivale!"

"Lo, Woggan," the Whittling Kid said carelessly.

"Merivale, reckon I'd best be brief, but I aim to be friendly."

"Bein' friendly would be a new experience for yuh, Woggan," the Kid drawled.

Woggan frowned. His eyes took on a wolfish glint.

"Merivale, yuh owed my dead granddad, Job Woggan, for ground rent and water rent. What yuh owed him, yuh now owe me." He paused.

The Kid's pale face hardened.

"I'm listenin'!"

Woggan glanced at the forty-five filling the Kid's holster.

"As yuh can't possibly pay what yuh owe, I'm forced to foreclose and take yore house. I'll give yuh a receipt in full. And like I said, I aim to be friendly. I'll be here at noon with a buckboard, ready to take yuh and yore effects over to the County House. Yuh'll be at no expense there, and all yore whittlin' will be clear profit."

The Kid laughed. His tones were like splintering iron. "Yuh'll foreclose, though yuh hold no mortgage. Yuh'll charge me ground and water rent, though we both know that Job Woggan told yuh to consider ten acres from here down to the river as mine. Yo're buckboard's coming to take me and Halfpint to the poorhouse at noon. Well, yuh've spoke your little piece. Now I'll speak mine!" Behind the Kid, Halfpint moved nervously, showing his tiny teeth at Woggan.

Woggan looked into blue eyes that stared his own down, so reckless and scornful was their fire. Woggan waited.

The Whittling Kid spoke slowly, drawling out his words in a bitterly contemptuous voice.

"Yuh double-crossin' side-winder! Yuh haven't any claim on my Cedar Chest. I don't doubt yuh'll come, with plenty men behind yuh. But yuh'll not get my house except over my dead body. I got a six-gun, a rifle and plenty of cartridges. When yuh come, come smokin'!" He slammed his door in Wolf Woggan's face.

"I'll be here at noon to foreclose," Woggan shouted at the door. "By that time yuh'll have come to yore senses." He galloped away.

The Whittling Kid shrugged.

"We've come to the end of our trail, Halfpint. Mebbe that's best, since we're both no-account critters. I'll save my last two cartridges for you and me. But before I use those two, some of his wolf-pack will be sizzling, down where they belong. I'm glad Cordy's off on trail; he couldn't save us. He'd just get drilled himself. Anyway, there's no chance to get him word."

At noon, looking from one of his little windows, the Whittling Kid informed his small, hairless companion:

"They've come, Halfpint. Woggan's got fifteen men with him, the idea bein' to scare us into surrender at once by such numbers. They've stopped at the cottonwoods. Wish I was the river down there at the foot of this slope, Halfpint. You can't cripple no river in a stampede."

The dog left him, ran to the north window and barked wildly. The Whittling Kid hobbled to it.

"More hellions, Halfpint?" Then the Kid's eyes opened wide.

Over the north rise poured pair after pair of ponies, all wearing harness. The rear pairs dragged along heavy lengths of second growth trees. In the van rode Cordy Smith and Talky Tally.

The Whittling Kid choked on something rising in his throat. Cordy was backed by the Locked Horns, and even Jim Broadax, the grizzled owner, was along.

UP AT the trees, Wolf Woggan purpled with surprise and fury.

"What in tarnation!" his *segundo* snarled.

"Them long poles is t'be used for runners first, and then for pontoons in the river," Woggan rasped. "They'll nail 'em to the Cedar Chest, move it to a center line, haul it down slope to the river and float it!"

"Yuh can't afford to let 'em do that! Aren't yuh going to order that outfit

off your land, pronto?"

"The Kid's within his legal rights in havin' their help to move his house," Woggan stared hard at his *segundo*. "You know that, Reckert!"

"I know yuh're goin' soft," sneered Reckert. "Law is on the side of the biggest outfit. Yuh got fifteen men with yuh, and they aren't but nine! We got a nickname—Woggan's Wolves. And Wolves don't give no warnin'!"

Savage glee came into Woggan's broad, coarse featured face.

"Only wanted to see how yuh'd feel! Pour it into 'em! I'll do my share! Every man of mine gets a hundred in *dinero* afterward!"

Reckert wheeled his horse, shoved it among the men, then came back to Woggan.

"They're with yuh! They'll make a clean job, so all the witnessin' as to who started the fracas will come from our side."

As they talked rapidly, Cordy Smith was talking as swiftly to the Whittling Kid:

"Noah's Ark is takin' to the river, feller! The boss himself is along, but I'm runnin' the show. The slope to the river is steep. This pillbox is near enough water tight, for she'll ride high and the teams will steady her. Woggan will have to let you go peaceful and—"

The roar of six guns from the trees interrupted him. Lead shattered the Kid's south window. He was standing in the doorway now, and a bullet cut the facing. Another tilted Cordy Smith's sombrero.

"Keep inside, Kid!" Cordy yelled. "Shut your door!" Then he whirled his horse to face the assembled men of the Locked Horns spread. "The Devil's broke loose boys. Lets charge 'em!"

They answered him with a wild yell of accord. Every man was fully armed, for while Cordy hadn't anticipated any such ambushing as this, he guessed there might be trouble.

Single and double trees were thrown down. The lead ponies were left to Broadax's care. Cordy and his men, on their still harnessed mounts flashed up the slope.

The Whittling Kid slammed his door, seized his crutches, reached for his rifle at the south window and picked a mark among the half-concealed ambushers.

He fired over the heads of his friends. They were racing for the Woggan outfit, ignoring the lead flung at them. The trace chains on their charging horses jingled wildly. Each man of the Locked Horns rode gun in hand, holding his fire at first, taking his luck as it came, charging . . . charging . . . toward the thin line of trees.

Freitag threw all his bullets at the south window of the Cedar Chest; the range was a trifle long. His lead whined near the Cedar Chest but never actually reached it as he emptied his gun. His trigger finger tried once more, he heard the futile click, then he screamed, pitched headlong to earth, dying under the well aimed rifle of the Whittling Kid.

Gunflame spurted from the racing Locked Horns. They came on in a swift, fierce thunder of horses and roar of guns. Woggan's Wolves had no time to reload. They had spent their cartridges too soon and now, with no saving seconds to reload, this avalanche of riding, blazing fury was on them, crashing in between the sparse trees.

They had downed two of Cordy's men, but that didn't save Woggan's Wolves from panic. An ambusher stripped of cover, however thin, suffers from shock. They whirled and fled, leaving behind three dead men. Woggan and the *segundo* had to go with them. But there was no panic in Woggan, nor had he given up the game.

CORDY wasted no time in pursuit. He made haste to examine two

of his men who had fallen. One was out of the fight, but his wound was not mortal. The second sat up, blinked his eyes and cursed an aching head.

"Your skull was too hard for a bullet," Cordy grinned at him. "Only slightly creased!"

The wounded cowboy was carried into the Cedar Chest and laid on the Whittling Kid's cot.

"Fightin' for a noaccount man and a noaccount dog. It isn't right!" the Kid declared grimly, and was told to button up his jaw and prepare to cross Jordan.

"They're not through! They'll come back with reinforcements," he objected angrily. "I'm not fit for anything but a slug. Call your men off Cordy! I won't have it!"

"Keep quiet, 'Noah'," grinned Cordy Smith. "You waste our time!"

Hard work, done fast and well, followed. The Cedar Chest, now transformed to a "Noah's Ark," was ready. The men worked desperately against time, hitching up the teams accustomed only to the saddle. Buckers cut the earth with shod hoofs. Cowboys filled the air with indignant profanity. Finally, the teams hurled themselves into their unwelcome collars and pulled furiously in an effort to run.

The Whittling Kid thrilled to the concern and ardor of his friends. Here were men to ride the river with—in deed as well as word. He'd grown to love the Cedar Chest, and they knew it. If it landed safely on the opposite river-shore all the ground he wanted there would be his, for that was the Lazy 2, noted for kindly generosity. He could go on making his wooden carvings and maybe some day earn enough to go east for an operation which might let him ride again.

Shouts, cracking of whips, yells of gee and haw which maddened the outraged saddle horses, rang out over the river. Luckily the slope was fairly steep with no gullied spots. Stones were hurriedly moved from the path, and the Cedar Chest moved on its way.

The Kid's eyes shone. The Chihuahua, aware his master was happy, barked shrilly. The wounded cowboy lying on the cot cursed, then complained loudly:

"I know Wolf Woggan! We'll never cross that river, with your Noah's Ark, that no good Woggan will sure sink us!"

The Whittling Kid laughed. Dropping on a chair, he caught up his guitar and his high, sweet-toned tenor floated through the open windows.

Another yard slipped past, another, another. The cedar Ark was traveling faster . . . faster! As the ground grew steeper, the ponies pulled more in unison.

Up in the blue, a buzzard drifted warily nearer, his greedy eyes regarding the fallen outlaws among the trees. But he paused in his flight. It was too soon to feast. There were too many men around that moving Cedar Chest. And too many other men racing toward it. Wolf Woggan and his reinforcements were ready for a fight to the finish!

THE slope increased in steepness. The cedar Ark went still faster. Cordy thanked his stars that the incline leveled out somewhat near the river. The Ark's own momentum would help carry it across the narrow flat, from which it could be floated on to the deep but quiet waters.

Talky rode one of the lead ponies. Curly, jockey-size, forked a wheeler. Ed Main, also light weight, rode center. These men were, like Cordy, good swimmers. Each wore a belt, with a knife, which would cut loose any tangles that might snarl the harness.

Cordy stood near the water, his glances divided between the Ark outfit making for the river and the tree line from which fresh trouble might come.

Cordy's boss, grizzled old Jim Broadax, was arranging a fighting

half-circle of men in case Woggan tried again. This menacing half-moon would guard a shore line long enough, Cordy hoped, to protect the Ark when it started its precarious voyage.

Sweet to the Whittling Kid's ears, was the splash of the van team as Talky hustled it into the river. As one pair of ponies after another dashed in, water foamed and boiled around them. The riding drivers shouted encouragement to them.

Then in went the wheel team and after them, with surprising smoothness came the Cedar Chest. It floated high and quite steadily, moving sedately over the water.

The Whittling Kid, looking out of his forward window shouted and cheered. He was wild with delight and astonishment over the management of the swimming ponies, now striking out frantically but obediently for shore.

On the Whittling Kid's cot the pessimistic cowboy writhed, groaned and prophesied dismally. "Cheer all you like! Woggan'll drown us! I thought I'd go thataway. Look! Water's comin' under your door!"

BEHIND the thin line of trees, Woggan stopped his men to reconnoiter. Reinforcement had replaced only the two dead outlaws, but the pause had rebuilt the courage of his mercenaries. An added stimulus was the doubling of the reward for victory and the order Woggan gave to two special men mounted on the most powerful horses he owned.

Now, except for those two, he and his wolves came charging and yelling down the slope toward the waiting half-moon line of defense, believing that by this they could break the morale of the Locked Horns, as their own had been broken.

But grizzled Broadax and his cowboys had a cold, level courage in action. They had shouted at the rearing bucking ponies, but now they were silent, grim lipped, steady.

None had rifles; so again they held their fire, waiting like veterans in battle until the charge should be close enough, leaving it to Woggan's howling wolves to work themselves up by an immediate salvo, which only wasted lead.

But the moment Woggan's pack swept close enough to those on the right horn of the half-moon, their guns shouted for them. A few seconds later, the left horn fired, then the center of the half-circle. They emptied three saddles, but the pack came on.

In the heat of battle, Broadax noted that Woggan's men should have numbered two more than were riding with him, and he sensed some scheme was afoot at the river. He prayed Cordy would not be caught unaware.

Woggan's two missing gunnies, riding horses known to be dependable swimmers, had slipped their mounts into the water, well above the right wing of the half-circle. They were cutting obliquely down toward the high-riding Cedar Chest, aiming to break connection between the Ark and the wheelers. If they tangled matters, and the Ark lurched over sideways, it would swamp with water pouring in through the bullet smashed window glass, and they would lose a big promised reward.

"Drill the driver, Waupie!" growled Link Ferden as the big horses lashed down the tide. "You're a fancy shot. I'll try to get the Kid before we dive in."

Waupie drew. They were armed with shoulder holsters and wore belts in which they carried a knife and a small hatchet. Wary, strong, agile fighters, they were Woggan's pick of the pack.

Waupie's wet gun-arm glistened in the sun. His hand, in spite of the plunging horse, steadied to a deadly aim at the rider on the off wheelhorse.

Then, as his trigger finger began to squeeze, a long, steely arm rose from

the river, snatched and held his gun-wrist, dragged him from the horse's sleek, bare back.

The gun fired harmlessly into the river. Waupie vanished. His companion, Link Ferden, had turned to look at the shore battle, and when he glanced back he gaped and gasped. He'd heard Waupie's shot as he looked at the shore fight. But now Waupie was gone!

Waupie's horse was swimming on, fast. And Link saw that the yellow river was boiling in a spot near him. Under that muddy veil, two big creatures were twisting, fighting in the deep water. Bubbles came to the surface.

Link swam his horse in a circle and, gun in hand, waited for what might rise.

Blood appeared. Then Waupie came up.

Terror distorted his face and death was written there.

Savagely, Link's w o l f i s h eyes searched for the victor; then he uttered a hoarse scream. A deadly grip snaked him from his swimming horse and pulled him under.

ONCE more the yellow river boiled and foamed. Once more a riderless horse swam on as Cordy Smith and Link Ferden went down, down together.

When Link plunged into the water caught by his left wrist, he let go his gun and went under, reaching for Cordy's throat. He missed that, but he got a strangle hold on Cordy's neck. The hold broke, and they came up.

Link was a keen, supple fighter—savage, resourceful; but like all Woggan's men he was a complex of vicious hates, while Cordy, wherever he fought, kept a sharp, cool courage, wasting no energy in wild, red fury. He tried to keep Link from getting his knife out; but when they came up, both their knives caught the sunlight, flashing wickedly.

The roiled water swirled round them as they twisted and turned in it, attempting to get a hold, to thrust in, to drag down—anything that might win. They were alone in their water-world. Each must be his own savior, or his own destruction. They vanished b e n e a t h the surface once more. . . .

Only one came up in fighting trim. The other's heart was a sheath for his antagonist's knife.

Dripping with the yellow river water, a crimson splotch on his left shoulder where Link's knife had slashed, Cordy Smith ran fast along the river shore toward the Locked Horns and Woggan's Wolves. They had turned to hand-to-hand fighting now.

He reached there just in time to grab the wrist of a Woggan man about to bend a gun barrel over Broadax's grizzled head. Jerking Woggan's man off balance, Cordy tripped him hard, smashing him, face down, on hard earth.

"Lie there, or get drilled!" he growled.

The half-stunned gunman lay quiet. Cordy's gaze flashed over the battle-ground, and discovered five Woggan men galloping off. Woggan himself sat hunched together, badly wounded. His remaining men, except one, were dead.

"Boy, that was a fight!" Broadax declared. Then his face darkened. "We lost one, Pat Moran, and two are hurt—but not seriously hurt. Where are the two water-wolves you went after?"

"Down under. Reckon this feller I caught about to brain you, can drive his boss home in his buckboard. But not till I've had a word alone with him. Lend me a gun! If he doesn't answer me right, we'll drill him."

Cordy marched his prisoner aside. The man stood looking into a gun muzzle and the coldest, most deadly eyes his gaze had ever met.

"You're Woggan's *segundo!*" Cordy

snapped. "Tell me straight what's hid in that Cedar Chest that he was so bent to have it!"

AN hour later Cordy was across the river. Broadax had gone home with his dead rider packed on a horse, and his wounded supported by the other men with him. Woggan was traveling to his own ranch in the buckboard groaning with pain.

The Cedar Chest had landed safely.

Cordy Smith loomed tall in the Cedar Chest. Clothed and booted now, his shirt hid his surface wounds, of which he thought nothing. His voice was warm with happiness.

"Plenty men, Kid, who can be wolf-brave in a hot fight. But when Death fronts a man in cold quiet, giving him time to decide, he's apt to crack up in courage. So Woggan's *segundo* spilt the fact that Woggan wanted to get into this panelled hole I've just opened in your double wall. And here's what I just dug up out of the wall pocket!"

The Whittling Kid, trying to look indifferent, took the dirty sealed envelope, extracted a letter and read aloud:

To Tom Merivale, known as the Whittlin' Kid:

When yuh read this I'll be on the long trail and my nevvy, him they call Wolf Woggan, will have give yuh the sealed letter I left in my strong box, tellin' yuh about this panel safe. My will has left yuh everything in this Cedar Chest, so the map on the back of this letter is yores. This map'll show the location of a second gold mine I found and kept secret. Maybe it's only a pocket but plenty to make yuh rich. . . .

The Whittling Kid's eyes left the letter at that word. His gaze focused far into distance, saw the famous surgeon he needed. He looked still further and saw himself riding, roping again.

Silently, his eyes met those of Cordy Smith, and the flame of passionate gratitude Cordy saw burning there thrilled him with its deep friendship.

Their hands met.

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SIDEWINDER SIGN

By GUNNISON STEELE

Killer Bardo Could Tame Rattlers, But—

THE westering sun, setting behind the black tree trunks of the little grove at the waterhole, was like lamplight shining through the bars of a prison cell. Johnny Bamble could still feel its warmth on his back as he rode down into the little sink at the edge of the desert.

If Johnny had been less thirsty, he might have been cautious. But now, all he could think about was the water that he knew was there among the sandstone boulders and cottonwoods. Then, too, he'd lost all sign of "Snake" Bardo the afternoon before. No telling where Bardo was by now.

Johnny pulled up among the trees, dismounted and flung himself on his belly beside the shallow water hole. The water was green-scummed, warm, but it tasted mighty good. The big roan, without waiting for an invitation, thrust its ugly roman nose into the water and drank noisily.

The head and shoulders of a man showed

Caution and a sense of something amiss finally put Johnny on the alert. He wiped his mouth and slowly pushed himself back from the water.

Just then a cold voice said, "Drink yore fill, hombre. It's likely the last drink yuh'll ever have!"

Johnny Bamble didn't grab for the bone-handled six-shooter he wore, because he knew it would mean quick death. He turned slowly on his knees.

The long barrel of a sixgun, and the massive head and shoulders of a man, showed around the bole of a tree thirty feet away. The man's face was dark and cruel, shadowed by a battered black sombrero. And Snake Bardo, Johnny knew, was even blacker inside than out.

"Didn't know when yuh was well off, did yuh?" Bardo sneered. "I figured yuh'd head for this water hole, so I just waited here in the shade. Lift up yore hands, and get on yore feet!"

SLOWLY Johnny obeyed, silently berating himself for his carelessness. He'd known that Bardo was afoot and likely low on water. He should have guessed that the renegade would head for the nearest water hole. But now, with merciless death staring him in the face, was no time for regrets.

As Johnny got to his feet and stood with upraised hands, Snake Bardo came from behind the tree. Bardo was short, slender from the waist down, unbelievably thick and powerful above. He moved with a sidling, crablike gait as he came forward and took Johnny Bamble's gun.

Johnny's blocky body was tensed, ready to move in any direction if he saw an opening. But he didn't see it. He watched the grinning Bardo as he backed away with the gun. He felt like a man must feel with a noose

about his neck. Snake Bardo was a *malo hombre*, with a long list of killings and lesser crimes chalked against him.

"Look, Bardo," Johnny began, "there's plenty water here—"

"Shut up!" Bardo said flatly. He reached back behind the boulder and brought out a coiled rope. "When my bronc fell on the side of a ravine two days ago and busted its neck, I had to leave nearly everything behind. But I brought this rope, figurin' it might come in handy. And it did. Turn around, and put yore hands behind yuh."

"Ain't no use of that—"

"Turn, blast yuh!"

Johnny turned, put his hands behind him. Bardo looped the rope over his arms and jerked it tight. Soon his arms were securely bound. Then Bardo made him lie down on the ground while he bound his ankles.

This done, Bardo stood back and regarded Bamble with malevolent satisfaction.

Either of several things might have given Bardo the sobriquet of "Snake": his round, muddy little eyes; the fact that he got pleasure from handling snakes. But more likely it was the merciless cruelty inside him. Johnny Bamble knew he was in a mighty tough spot.

This water hole was in an isolated section of the country, with the nearest ranch thirty miles away. Johnny's own little cow outfit lay twice that distance to the east.

Bardo had his gun, and he was securely bound. The roman-nosed roan, after drinking its fill, was calmly nibbling the sparse grass two hundred feet away.

"That ought to hold yuh—a long time," Bardo said.

"Yuh can't get away with another killin', Bardo," Johnny argued.

"Who said I aimed to kill yuh? I just aim to take that roan of yores over there and ride away from here."

"And leave me tied up like this? That'd be murder just the same, only a bullet'd be quicker and easier. Look, Bardo, yuh've got the thousand dollars yuh held me up and robbed me of on the trail from Red Bluff—"

"And I aim to keep it! Yuh aim to put up a hard-luck tale about that money?"

JOHNNY shook his red head. "Nope. It was clear profit from my beef crop. I aimed to use it to buy a few head of blooded stuff, and that's why it made me so mad when yuh stuck a gun in my belly and took it.

"So instead of goin' to the law, I took out after yuh myself. When I come across yore dead horse back there I thought I had yuh. But then the wind blew up, and covered yore tracks.

"I circled most of this mornin', lookin' for sign, and when I didn't find it I headed for this water hole. I got kind of careless. But then, I figured yuh hadn't had time to get this far afoot."

Snake Bardo grinned. "Which makes everything just dandy. Nobody but an occasional prospector ever comes this way, and mebbe it'll be another month or two before another one does. So I won't kill yuh. I'll just take yore bronc and ride away, and if yuh die, I can't help it."

If Johnny Bamble felt dread at the prospect he didn't show it.

"You were named right, Bardo," he said evenly, "that'd be a rattlesnake trick. Only mebbe a rattler wouldn't be that low."

Bardo laughed, seemingly pleased by the comparison.

"Snakes have got more sense than most humans," he said. "That's why I like 'em. Well, I aim to eat a few bites, then I'm ridin'!"

He reached back behind a boulder and brought forth an almost empty gunny sack. From the sack he took a couple of unappetizing-looking sandwiches. Johnny watched as he

wolfed the food.

The sun still shone redly across the desert. The wind had died and the desert was very still except for the crunching noises of the big roan as he nibbled the sparse grass.

As Johnny lay there he thought about the thousand dollars Bardo had stolen from him. Only now money didn't seem so important. He looked furtively about, but saw nothing to offer a ray of hope.

Flies buzzed over the scummy water. A buzzard circled low overhead. A huge bull rattlesnake, which had been coiled in the deep shadows back under a nearby boulder, was stirring lazily, its wedge-shaped head and two feet of rusty body edging onto the sand.

Johnny looked at Bardo. The murderous desperado was watching the rattler with pleasurable interest. Johnny felt revulsion. Bardo's grin wasn't cruel now, but actually friendly.

Another moment, and the entire five feet of bloated coils had emerged from under the boulder. The huge reptile was gliding inch by inch toward a patch of underbrush several yards away. But when Bardo got up suddenly, wiping greasy hands on his trousers, the rattler stopped and jerked itself into a half coil.

"Mebbe it don't recognize its brother," Johnny Bamble said sardonically.

"Rattlers won't hurt yuh," Bardo declared. "Only yuh got to know how to handle 'em to get 'em in a good humor."

"Reckon yuh'd know how."

"Yeah, I know how."

Johnny grunted disbelievingly.

"I believe everything I ever heard about yuh, Bardo, except that yuh can pick rattlers up in your hands and pet 'em."

"I'll show yuh," Snake Bardo boasted, angry that anyone should doubt his famed and rather remarkable skill.

AS HE walked toward the huge reptile, the creature coiled itself back into a tight knot. Its repulsive head stood straight up and began to weave to and fro and the air vibrated with its angry buzz.

Bardo hunched his massive shoulders forward until he was in a half crouch. He thrust out a hand, moving it in a circular motion not over three feet from the rattler's evil head. The big snake struck suddenly, lashing out with lightning speed.

But Bardo had moved even faster. And then, before the rattler could jerk itself into another deadly coil, he lunged forward with incredible speed. There was a flurry of snake and man and dust—and when Bardo straightened, the fingers of his right hand were gripped just behind the rattler's wedge-shaped head!

The reptile's body was coiled tightly about Bardo's hairy arm from wrist to shoulder. Bardo seemed to have forgotten Johnny Bamble. He was making soft, crooning noises in his thick throat, and his left hand was stroking the rattler's twitching coils gently.

And, gradually, the rattlesnake grew still. Its coils relaxed, and five feet of rattlesnake dangled quietly from Bardo's right hand. Johnny Bamble felt sick.

Bardo turned to the trussed-up ranch owner, a calculating light in his inky eyes. For a sickening moment, Johnny feared that Bardo meant to let the rattler bite him.

But Bardo said, "Told yuh, didn't I? He wouldn't hurt me now, no more'n I'd hurt him."

He stooped, placed the rattler gently on the ground. Almost reluctantly, it seemed to Johnny, the huge reptile glided away and vanished into the underbrush.

"Mebbe he'll come back," Bardo laughed evilly. "And when he don't find me, mebbe he'll be mad and decide to take it out on you. That'll give yuh somethin' to think about.

And now, I'm ridin'!"

When Johnny did not answer, Snake Bardo turned and strode toward the roan grazing on the side of an incline a short distance away. As he came near, the big horse raised its head and pricked up its ears—alert and curious.

Although Bardo was a stranger, the roan did not attempt to shy off and run away. And Bardo was particularly careful, knowing that his life depended on catching the horse. He approached slowly, talking coaxingly.

Johnny could see the grin of triumph on Bardo's face as he reached out his right hand quickly to grasp the bridle reins. At the same time, he saw a tremor run through the roan's powerful body.

And then, suddenly, the roan seemed to explode like a great stick of dynamite. It reared straight up, screaming with rage or fear, its forehoofs smashing savagely and with unbelievable swiftness at Snake Bardo.

Caught off guard, Bardo yelled and ducked frantically aside. But one of the slashing hoofs caught him on the shoulder and knocked him to his knees. The roan's hoofs were still hammering the air. Bardo cursed, panic in his voice, and he scampered like a crippled spider on hands and knees as he tried to get away.

But the roan, ears flattened, stark fury in its blazing eyes, lunged after him. Bardo saw he couldn't get away. He rolled desperately aside, grabbing at his gun. But the roan was upon him, bared teeth snapping, shod hoofs slashing, pounding, tromping.

FOR a moment Johnny lost sight of Bardo in the swirling dust. Then, when the raging roan backed away finally, the squat renegade lay there, still, on the ground. The roan stood a moment, stiff-legged, trembling, glaring at the still figure. Then it turned and walked away and started to graze.

Then Johnny went into action. He tried every which way to get at his pocketknife and all but stood on his head to make it fall to the ground. It took him ten minutes to open it and wedge the haft between two big rocks; another ten minutes to cut the ropes that bound his wrists.

Two minutes later, he stooped over Snake Bardo's still, twisted figure. Bardo's face was bloody, his clothes almost ripped from his body, but he was alive.

Johnny dragged him down to the water hole and poured water over his battered face. After a while Bardo groaned and opened his eyes. He had been badly bruised and cut by the roan's hoofs, but he would live to hang.

"What in blazes happened to that roan devil?" he asked as he painfully came to a sitting position.

Johnny said, "It was that pal of yores that done it."

"That . . . what?"

"The rattler." Johnny Bamble grinned broadly. "Once, when he was a colt, a rattler bit the roan on the nose and he nearly died. Since then, he's hated 'em worse than sin. Sight or smell of a snake always makes him crazy mad."

"But what's that got to do with him jumpin' on me like that?"

"When yuh reached for the reins he smelled the snake scent on yore hands," Johnny said. "Yuh see, Bardo, there's always somethin' you hombres slip up on. Yuh can't get away with murder, yuh know!

"When I saw that snake I tried to think of some way to connect his smell with you so that when yuh went for my horse yuh wouldn't have it so easy. That's why I coaxed yuh into showin' me yuh could tame a rattler! Yuh ain't so smart, Bardo!"

Next Issue's Novel: BULLET HARVEST FOR RENEGADES

THE SHERIFF LENDS A HAND

By LYNTON WRIGHT BRENT

Young Lawman Kip Reed Faces His Toughest Problem When His Foster-father Goes Gunning on the Trail of Vengeance!

AS HIS paint stallion carried him in view of the humble cabin, Sheriff Kip Reed's perturbed mind failed to revel in the charm of the tiny sunlit valley—a green gem lush with early morning freshness at foot of the low knoll.

He was going to arrest his official predecessor, and the misery inflicted by duty made him oblivious to scenic beauty. It also caused him to ignore sane precaution. Even now the rough-and-ready oldster might be crouching near a window, his .45 Colt drawn and ready.

Sheriff Reed was risking death. Yet somehow he just could not sneak up on Ma and Pa Ellery, the only two real friends he had ever known.

He passed under the branches of some cottonwoods. The sight of a bullet-riddled tree-stump brought an uncomfortable lump to his throat. Here, ex-sheriff John Ellery had patiently labored to make him as good a gunman as himself, and in this respect Ellery was without a peer in that part of the West.

Pronto whinnied with nostalgic fervor, but Kip Reed shrank inwardly. This was to be poor payment, indeed, for the happiness of this former home which he had left, a year ago, for quarters behind the county sheriff offices.

Kip Reed wheeled just as Hank Willet raised his rifle

Little had Kip Reed dreamed then that some days his duty would compel him to track down his foster father. Had he known that he would have—

"Now it was too late. Last night Pa Ellery shot and wounded Claude Brady, the mortgage specialist, who had just foreclosed Pa Ellery's small spread. Brady had employed the same tricky methods he had used to swallow the Warner place, and Pete Morgan's layout. He had given the Ellery's until sundown to vacate.

Brady was a master of the art of shady manipulation, always keeping within the limits of the statutes.

Seemingly Pa's age-old adherence to law and order had cracked. After the shooting the mortgage shark had demanded that Pa Ellery be arrested.

Suddenly Kip Reed began to frown. No man in Coon County could arrest the ex-sheriff! Not unless Ellery surrendered, which he would never do. Kip Reed was positive that he could not beat his old gun tutor to the draw. He remembered what Pa Ellery had said after he had retired a year ago and Reed had donned the star. Ellery had made his foster son promise never to neglect duty, regardless of circumstances.

As he left the trees and neared the cabin, the young sheriff's thoughts returned to the shooting of Brady. Evidently the oldster had not fired to kill. This puzzled Reed. Pa Ellery must have had some plan. Perhaps he meant to rid Poncho City not only of Brady, but also of his ruthless henchmen, Hank Willitt and Raol Sim. Kip Reed's frown deepened. He wondered how he could act without blocking Pa Ellery's effort.

KIP REED drew up at the cabin. He felt tense and undecided. The odor of the honeysuckle jogged his memory, a twelve-year-old recollection. He remembered a scene in front of that cabin after Pa Ellery had rescued a ten-year-old orphan from a burning prairie schooner. Ma Ellery stood in the doorway receiving that boy in her warm strong arms. There had been honeysuckle perfume in the air that day . . . Sheriff Reed resisted violent impulse to rip off his badge and dash it against a rock.

The cabin door opened.

A lean-faced woman appeared, her fading gray eyes dim with sorrow.

"Hello, my son," said Ma Ellery. The quiet tones of her voice were infinitely tragic. "Yuh've come to arrest Pa." It was not a question, but an acceptance of a fact. "I ain't blamin' yuh none. Livin' with a sheriff so many years, I'm used to the law sometimes bein' lopsided."

Kip nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

"Pa ain't here, Kip," she went on. "That's gospel."

Kip swallowed hard. His long bronzed fingers rubbed the saddlehorn absently. Even under such circumstances she would speak the truth. He knew Ma Ellery.

"Then I reckon I missed him, Ma," he answered.

"Reckon you did, my son." There was a heavy catch in her voice.

Sheriff Kip Reed turned away his eyes. They had begun to moisten.

"If Pa didn't have the hundred dollars to meet the last mortgage payment," he suddenly blurted out, "why didn't he come to me for the money?"

"He had the money, Kip. "Two men bushwhacked him when he was ridin' to town to pay off. They tuck his money, Kip. And the time-note was up-due before he could get more. That was yesterday."

Kip Reed's jaw hardened. The bushwhackers would be Hank Willit and Raol Sim. A cut-and-dried frameup!

"When Pa retired," Ma Ellery continued in flat tones, "we was set fer life, we thought. Then them cattle up and died. We had to mortgage the place."

Young Reed's heart bled for the distressed woman. "Did Pa see the coyotes who jumped him?" he asked. "No," Ma replied in bitter tones. "They sprung from the dark. Knocked him unconscious. When he come to, he set out for town an' found Brady in Doc Brown's saloon. He give the skunk a chance to draw. Brady dove out the open window. Pa jammed—then fired too late. He nicked Brady's shoulder!"

Kip grunted. He did not believe Pa Ellery's gun had jammed.

"How do you know all this, Ma?" he asked.

"Pa come home to get his other six-gun and told me, ain't no use expectin' him to give himself up, son. Brady takin' the roof right off'n our heads has sent Pa plumb loco. He ain't his ownself, a-tall!"

"I guess that's true, Ma," said her foster son.

MA ELLERY'S withered mouth twitched nervously.

"If yore fetchin' him in, Kip, be careful. He won't miss-fire again. He's plumb proud of his shootin' record. Yuh know that."

The tragic ring in her voice splashed more misery in Kip's soul.

Suddenly, he wheeled his paint stallion, and galloped back through the valley. He wondered how he could stand up against the man who had reared him with tenderness and love.

As Sheriff Kip Reed rode into Poncho City he felt the staring eyes upon him. Old friends standing in front of the general store turned as the paint trotted up the broad street, kicking up clouds of gray dust. On the porch of the feed-store directly across the street from the Doc Brown's saloon, Val Warner stood with Brady's other recent victim, Pete Morgan. Neither nodded a greeting to Reed.

Ranchers, their shopping wives and clinging children, stopped to watch him pass by. He sensed their disdain, and flushed angrily at the injustice of their bearing. Oh, he knew what they were thinking, all right!

They believed that he, Sheriff Kip Reed, had ridden in to arrest his foster father at the behest of Brady, a trickster. Reed's heart burned with hot resentment.

The young sheriff's eyes smoldered as he dismounted at the south end of the street. Brady's big, rambling home stood before him. He threw the reins over the tie-rail and mounted the steps. A scowling porch guard moved forward. It was Hank Willit.

Reed put his hand on Willit's chest and shoved hard. The man went reeling backward against the wall while the Winchester clattered to the pine boards. Then Reed stepped over the gun and walked into the house.

He found Claude Brady pacing the long parlor floor. His left shoulder was swathed in bandages and his frock coat was open. To Reed he seemed to be flaunting the wound as though it were of tremendous importance. Brady was a beefy, middle-aged man, strong as a bull. A .45 Colts rode low on his right thigh under his long coat.

Brady stopped pacing when he saw Reed. His penetrating black eyes flashed with a sudden light.

"Well, Sheriff," Brady bawled, "did you pick up Ellery?"

Kip Reed's anger flared.

"No!" he snapped.

Suddenly he seemed to feel the star which was pinned to the cloth upon his chest. Actually it seemed to have weight.

Claude Brady glowered.

"Then, what are you doing here? Get Ellery behind bars, or I'll see that you turn in that badge."

Kip's broad mouth tightened into a thin line. Brady's inference was plain, even though he failed to say that Kip Reed would never arrest his foster father.

"If John Ellery's gunning for you," drawled Sheriff Reed, "he'll come here, most likely. So, I'm here to help guard your carcass."

As he spoke, his blue eyes narrowed in mocking scorn.

Brady started at him nervously. "Reed, you're not needed here," he said. "Hank Willit's on guard, and I'm not a bad shot myself. I want you to track down Ellery. At once."

Kip Reed's answer was to give a hitch of his gunbelt. Brady wanted Ellery caught plenty bad, all right. Even with a porch guard, he was scared.

"While I'm here," said Kip, "I'd like to lift that Ellery mortgage." His eyes bored into Brady. "I want the Ellery spread left alone."

Brady drew on his cigar, spouting short rapid puffs of smoke.

"It isn't Ellery's spread no more."

Kip drew out a wallet from his pocket, extracted five twenty-dollar bills. Brady scowled at the money.

"As an officer of the law," Brady leered, "it isn't your place to go around adjusting other men's business affairs!"

"Business!" Kip scoffed. "Yuh call it 'business' to swindle honest men? You lifted Val Warner's place, and Pete Morgan's, too. Yuh're not liftin' the Ellery spread!"

"Careful what you say!" Brady purred in deadly calm. "Careful—Reed—"

Tiny blue flames flickered in Kip Reed's eyes.

"Yuh're closing out an aged couple," he accused Brady, "for a measly hundred dollars. The deal smells!"

"By the law, I got that right!"

"By the law you make for yoreself here in Poncho City!" Reed snapped. "No court would hold such an act, and yuh know it!"

Brady smiled.

"What court? Where?"

There was not a judge within miles. Even the county seat was little more than a group of saloons and gambling dens.

"I'll pay that overdue note," Kip breathed. His low tone heralded a warning.

"Too late," Brady snapped. "Time on the note was up-due yesterday, at midnight!"

SHERIFF KIP REED replaced the wallet in his levis to leave his hands free.

"Brady," he said, "yuh're a skunk!"

Brady's face grew dark. He stiffened.

"I'll have you run out of town for that!" he bellowed.

Kip studied the man before him.

Kip Reed studied the mortgage trickster.

Every man in the county knew that Pa Ellery's spread was a choice one, and that Claude Brady had been eager to add it to the list of other cattle ranches he had filched.

"What have you got to say about last night's bushwacking?" asked the young sheriff.

Brady's face became expressionless yet it was obvious that he was uneasy.

"What bushwhacking? What're you driving at?"

"Where were Hank and Raol last night?"

"Here with me."

"The whole night?"

"That's right."

"Yuh swear it?"

"Of course!"

The muscles in Brady's countenance twitched. Then he boiled over.

"Look here!" he stormed. "You better be careful with your insinuations!"

"I have a right to ask questions in line of duty."

"Get out of here!" Brady warned. Then his eyes shifted to the door.

Kip Reed caught the signal. He wheeled, just as Hank Willit raised his rifle.

Kip Reed's hand snaked his own

gun up, and the blast of its discharge echoed like a cannon in the large room. Like Pa Ellery, he had not fired to kill. Hank Willit's Winchester fell to the floor.

Screaming in agony, the henchman clutched his bullet-torn hand, whirled, and disappeared. Kip fell backward as he braced his taut body against the wall and covered Brady with his smoking gun.

Brady fidgeted. He held his hands well away from his sides, indicating his reluctance to draw.

Kip straightened slowly. Then reholstered his weapon.

"That signal to Hank wasn't so good," he grunted. "You better practice up a bit."

Brady smiled nervously.

"Locking me up, Sheriff?" he asked.

Kip shook his head.

"No. I've got a better plan. Running looose, yuh'll be a good target for Warner, or Morgan, or Pa Ellery! It would be too bad if I didn't happen to be around to protect yore hide. The feeling is high right now for Pa. And against you! I figger yore death will be celebrated with much whoopin' and hollerin'."

"Maybe you won't be on earth to see me crucified, Kip Reed," sneered Brady. "Now, if you don't mind, I'll ask you again to get out of my house!"

"Yep, it shore is stuffy in here."

He backed out, eyes still alert and on the house even after his boots had struck soft dirt.

KIP REED rode his stallion across the street to Doc Brown's pretentious drinking and gambling establishment, left him standing at the tie-rail and passed through the swinging doors. He needed something to wash away the bad taste in his mouth, the memory of his visit with Brady.

Ranchers at poker tables and the bar turned as Kip Reed entered. Their eyes were coldly neutral. The young sheriff understood. There was not a man's son present who probably was not hoping that Pa Ellery would rid the town of Brady.

Kip Reed rested one foot on the bar-rail and nodded a greeting to the proprietor. But Doc Brown's customary smile was absent; his eyes seemed to bore holes into Kip's face.

"I'll take rye," said the young sheriff.

Doc Brown looked around the room, his chubby elbows heavy on the bar. Then again he met his patron's gaze.

"All out of rye," he announced.

Kip stared at the bottles on the glass shelf of the backbar. They were full bottles. Then his eyes swiveled back to those of Brown inquiringly.

"When yuh finish yore business in town," said Doc Brown, "come back. If the air ain't polluted, then I'll be askin' yuh to have a drink—on the house."

As Sheriff Kip Reed stepped out of the saloon he glanced up the dust-crusted street. Then he stopped short. A premonition of tragedy had guided his eyes toward Brady's house. A big man was just leaving the porch, holding himself as straight as an arrow. Something about the rhythm of his walk seemed menacing and deadly. It was Pa Ellery—on the prod!

Kip Reed gulped once and then ducked under the hitch-rail to the side of his stallion. He threw the reins over the saddle and gave the horse a resounding slap on the rump. With a flirt of his tail the paint galloped away. Reed did not want the animal in the possible line of fire.

Then the sheriff thought of Ma Ellery and his heart sank.

She would never forgive him for killing Pa. She would never forgive Pa, for killing him! Either way, Ma would lose.

Kip Reed walked to the center of the street, standing with legs apart, hands loose at his sides. The phrase "John Ellery, you're under arrest,"

kept sounding in his brain. He would have to say those words soon—and take the consequences.

Idlers, townsmen, women and children disappeared from view. Magically the street became deserted. Poncho City was clearing its thoroughfares for action.

Sheriff Reed watched the big man advance. Those sturdy legs, clad in levis ending where a well-worn buckskin shirt began, were moving like the pistons of a death-dealing machine. Firmly on the grayed head sat the battered Big Four hat which had served the oldster during his years as sheriff. And low on the wide thighs two six-guns hung ready, deadly in the brawny hands of this expert gunman.

Two six-guns! Ellery had never before worn but one!

Kip Reed swallowed hard. His foster father was prepared to battle three men! Brady, Hank, Raol! He was out to rid the town of its vultures.

It flashed through Reed's mind why Pa Ellery had merely wounded Claude Brady. Killing a man who wouldn't draw was against the Western code. He had told Ma his gun jammed as an excuse to get his other weapon from home. She would not have let him go had she known what he planned.

KIP REED'S eyes swept the tops of the buildings and the narrow alleyways between them for a glimpse of Brady or Raol Sim. But they were not in sight. Pa Ellery, Reed reasoned, was expecting to find his kill in Brown's Saloon.

A half smile broke slowly over the young sheriff's face as Pa reached hailing distance. Maybe the old fellow would not shoot—just refuse to be arrested until he had disposed of Brady. But, if Kip arrested him, he'd be compelled to take him in tow. But, how? You can't shoot a man if he won't draw; and you could not budge Pa Ellery without a mule-team!

When they were twenty feet apart, Ellery halted.

Kip's heart began skipping beats as he saw Pa Ellery's bloodshot eyes. The oldster was not responsible. His rage, just like Ma had said, had made him temporarily loco.

"Pa," Kip said firmly, but reluctantly, "I arrest you for shooting a coyote out of season."

John Ellery's eyes kindled with the resolve of a madman. He did not seem to recognize his accoster as Kip Reed—only as an armed man who blocked his passing.

"Leave me be," Ellery murmured. "I'm goin' tuh kill Claude Brady!"

"Don't draw, Pa," Kip pleaded. "Don't!"

Argument was useless, and Kip Reed knew it.

Suddenly he caught the flash of sunlight on a gun barrel atop the general store. He could see a hat there and a bandaged hand. That would be Hank Willit, hidden by the far side of the gabled roof.

"Pa! Look out!" Kip shouted.

Another rifle barrel had slithered noiselessly through the opened window of the feed-store directly across the street.

Hank Willit and Raol Sim had Pa Ellery between them now. The old man seemed sane enough to realize the situation. His eyes swept upward.

The young sheriff heard a move behind, and glanced over his shoulder.

Brady! The trickster must have slipped out from behind the saloon building when Reed had yelled the warning.

This act meant but one thing to Reed. Brady was going to finish him after Hank and Raol had killed Pa Ellery. Then Brady would claim that Pa's blazing guns, which were certain to blaze, had downed Kip. This analysis, flashing across the young sheriff's mind, determined his next move.

Kip Reed's right hand swung backward with incredible speed. His six-gun upward and free of leather, he dropped to the ground and fired at the rooftop hat.

In that same flash of time Pa Ellery's guns came up, spouting flame.

Brady's gun blasted twice.

Kip felt something rip into his left arm.

It was one of Brady's bullets. Reed rolled over to his side in the dust. As he did so he caught a glimpse of Brady, knees buckling. As the mortgage trickster pitched face forward the skidding body of Hank Willit slithered off the roof and struck the street with a resounding thud.

Kip Reed sent a well-aimed shot to the feed-store window where Raol Sim's rifle blazed fitfully. A bullet ripped back across his scalp and he grew suddenly dizzy. Then the rifle stopped. A second later, it toppled onto the boardwalk.

Vaguely, Kip saw Pa crumpling, limp as a torn cobweb. With his arm and head spurting blood, Kip staggered to his feet and shuffled drunkenly forward. Stars were bursting in his brain like blinking owl-eyes. Then he fell across Pa's prostrate form, and consciousness faded.

WHEN Kip Reed came to, in the back room of the saloon, every detail of the shooting fracas paraded swiftly across his memory. Then presently he saw a blotch of rugged tan hovering over him. His eyes focused on Pa Ellery, whose huge naked chest was heavily bandaged.

Pa's face looked tired, but placid. The rugged oldster's blood-stained buckskin shirt lay in a heap on the floor. Now a big grin seamed his lined features. Kip noticed his eyes no longer had the crazed stare of a wounded animal.

"Yuh all right, son?" asked Pa Ellery. Sheriff Kip Reed smiled, then winced at the sharp pain in his left arm. Looking down he discovered it was swathed in clean white cloth. His head felt heavy as lead. Across the room, Doc Brown was cleaning some medical instruments.

"I'm all right, Pa," Reed replied cheerfully. Relief that John Ellery was still alive swept over him.

"Reckon I'll be gettin' on," Pa Ellery told him. "Ma's most likely waitin' for some firewood." Brusquely, he added: "We'll be expectin' yuh for lunch, Sheriff." He started to leave when Kip called:

"About last night—how come yuh just wounded Brady?"

Pa Ellery ran gnarled fingers over his mouth and chin.

"Waal, he's dead, son. That's all that matters, now. So are them other coyotes."

"I'd be obliged if yuh would answer my question," said Kip Reed.

"Ain't gonna tell yuh. Bein' as yuh're sheriff—an' stealin' is a crime."

"I don't get yore meanin'," persisted Kip Reed.

"Don't intend yuh should." The oldster chuckled as he added: "When a coward's been scared—shot at—he'll always remove his valuable papers, such as land-deeds out of his safe, and tuck 'em in his inner coat pocket. A man has got to be alive to do that. Dead men leave their papers locked up. I ain't no safe-cracker."

Kip smiled. He said nothing.

Pa Ellery slid into his buckskin shirt.

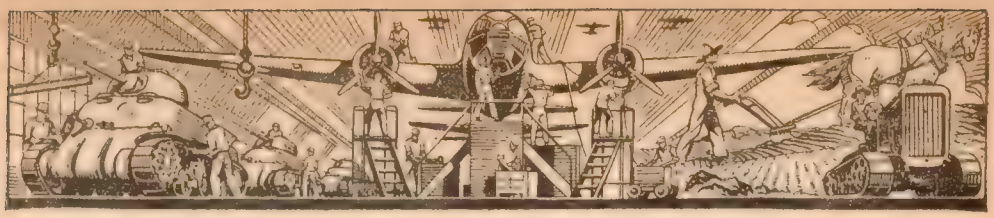
"Do you-all know where I can find Val Warner and Pete Morgan?"

"As I rode into town," Kip Reed said, "they were standin' by the feed-store. When you give 'em their land-deeds, say hello, for me."

John Ellery feigned indignation, grinned again, then left the room.

Doc Brown came over to the cot, his big fist wrapped around a filled whisky glass, and his round face a pattern of grave concern.

(Concluded on page 107)



THE SINEWS OF VICTORY

A Tribute to America's Heroes of Production

By MAJOR GENERAL E. B. GREGORY

Quartermaster General, United States Army

Photo U. S. Army Signal Corps
MAJOR GENERAL GREGORY

THE production side of this war will be won by Americans who do the small things well, whether it is making a rivet for a tank or sewing a sleeve in an Army uniform.

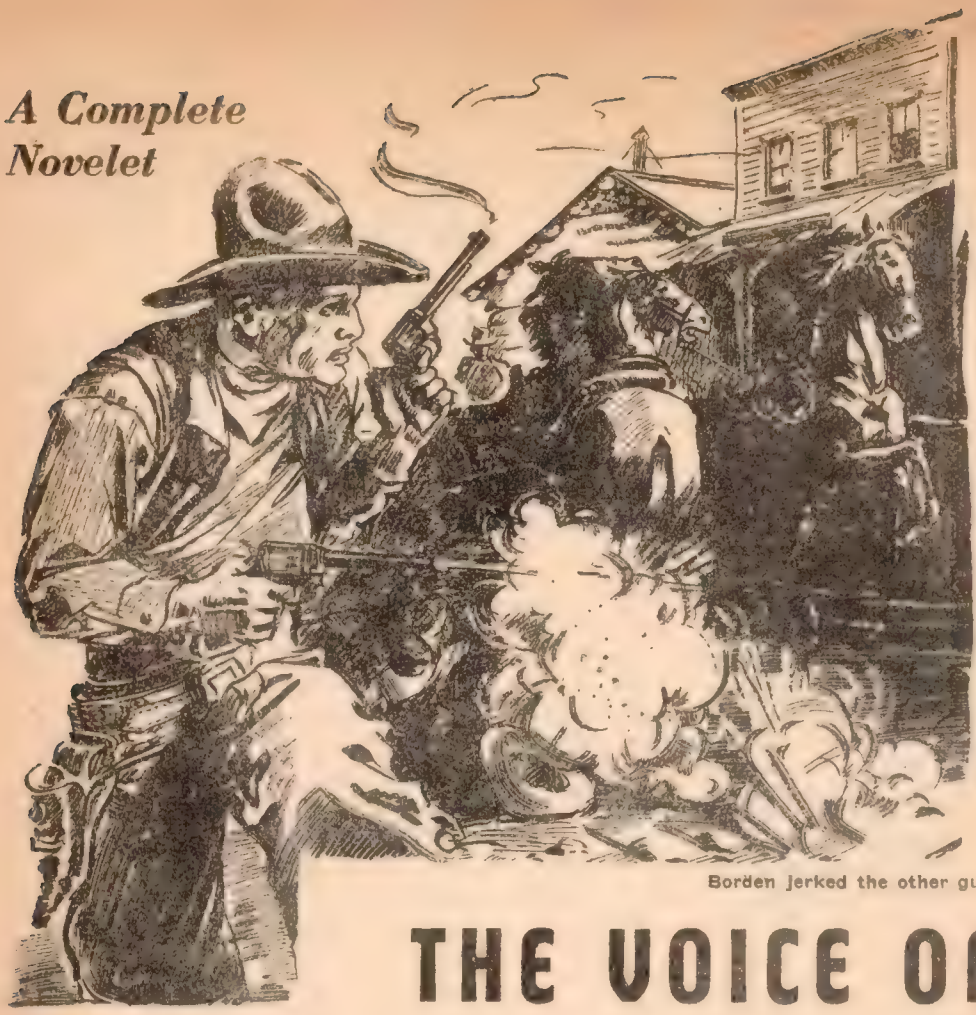
The casual onlooker is too apt to think of war production just in terms of big tanks, giant bombers, long-range guns and fighting ships.

These are vitally necessary. But in this war, as in every war, the men who fight are human beings. They must have food, clothing and shelter before they can be expected to fly their planes, fire their guns or sail their ships.

Throughout America today, there are millions of workers turning out clothing and tents, growing and processing foodstuffs, building barracks, raising horses and mules—all absolute necessities to the Army, all direct contributions to ultimate victory.

When historians write down the heroes of production in this war, they will spotlight those who served faithfully in the production of necessities that keep our fighting men and equipment in operation. The heroes will be the men and women who did their duty at every place in the production line.

A Complete Novelet



Borden jerked the other gun

THE VOICE OF

CHAPTER I

Poole Strikes

HOOFBEATS muffled by thick dust sounded in Tonto City's street. It was the hottest time of day, and the town drowsed. The hoofbeats gave no hint of urgency, so men paid little attention to them.

Five riders of the Broken Box outfit came into the end of the street and loped along it. They wore rough range clothes soaked with perspiration. Their wide-brimmed hats were pulled down low, and their sweat-sodden neckcloths were pulled up over their mouths and nostrils to keep out the dust. They all wore guns, with the holsters tied down. Five riders from the Broken Box outfit looking for trouble.

Harvey Poole, owner of the Broken Box, was riding slightly ahead of the others. He was long and lean in body, middle-aged, hard. He was the sort of man who removed obstacles in his path regardless of the rights of other men.

Behind him, with the other three, rode Joe Alder, who was Poole's right hand man. He was short and squat, with a round face and a light, uneven mustache stained by tobacco juice. The other three were riders who had been with the Broken Box for years

Newspaper Editor Lance Bordon Proves That the

By
JOHNSTON
McCULLEY

out of his belt (CHAPTER V)

TONTO BASIN

and were always ready to do Harvey Poole's bidding, whatever it might be. Hard men they were, all four of them.

For years, Harvey Poole had been the lord of Tonto Basin, and his Broken Box the biggest outfit there by far. But prosperity and power had made him a bully. He was getting too big for his boots. He was reaching out too far, and might lose his balance and fall off the limb.

The five riders loped past the blacksmith shop and gave no response to the smith's gestured salutation. The blacksmith squinted into the bright sun glare as he looked after them.

"Bent on trouble," he growled, spitting into the deep dust at his feet. "Trouble for somebody. Glad I'm not the one. Be a good time not to see too much." He disappeared into the shadowed depths of his smithy and began fussing with his tools. Afterward, he could say he had seen nothing, had heard nothing.

The five riders, with Harvey Poole leading, went past two saloons, which was unusual. They passed the public stable and corral and the general store run by Ed Welch, who was also the Tonto City postmaster.

A few men watched them pass, but made no comment. It was a good thing to appear indifferent when Poole and his men were bent on trouble. A man might think what he

pleased, but it was wise not to express his thoughts in words, or even reveal them in his face.

The five swung out of the middle of the street and stopped in front of a little shack. Across its front was a weather-faded sign which designated it as the office of the Tonto Basin *Voice*.

LANCE BORDON, publisher and editor of the *Voice*, was in the back room trying to adjust the roller of his old hand press. His helper, a half-witted boy of the town, glanced through the open door and saw Poole and his men dismounting in the blazing sun and tying their mounts to the hitch rail. He gave a squawk of fear and darted through the back door.

Lance Bordon was wiping his inky hands with a bunch of waste when Harvey Poole and the others entered the front room. Lance Bordon was an enthusiastic young man who had not learned to temporize with an adversary. He had started the Tonto Basin *Voice* on a shoestring which seemed as elastic as a rubber band. He had forgotten that a rubber band can snap back if stretched too far.

Lance Bordon's face was inscrutable as he stepped into the open doorway between the two rooms. He continued wiping his hands. He had been expecting this visit, but had made no preparations to repel violence.

"Howdy, Poole," he greeted.

Harvey Poole went straight to the point.

"In the last issue of this rag yuh call a newspaper, yuh had a piece about me."

"I don't recall that your name was mentioned in the issue," Lance Bordon said.

"Oh, yuh didn't mention any name. But yuh were meanin' me. Yuh printed 'There's one man in Tonto Basin who's getting so big for his britches that he thinks other men have no rights.'"

"Well, Poole, does that description fit you?" Bordon asked.

"Don't waste time on the squirt!" Joe Alder growled.

Poole silenced him with a gesture and continued staring at Bordon.

"We don't need a newspaper in Tonto City," Poole said. "When we do, I'll buy an outfit an' hire an editor and start one. Anyhow, Bordon, this town won't be healthy for yuh after sunrise tomorrow mornin'."

"I'm staying," Bordon said. "You can't drive me out!"

"If yuh're here after sunrise tomorrow, plenty will happen to yuh! Yuh won't have any business here, anyhow. There won't be any paper for yuh to run. Get busy, boys!"

Harvey Poole whipped gun out of holster, slammed Bordon back against the wall and held the muzzle of his gun jammed into Bordon's stomach. Joe Alder and the other three men got busy.

They marched into the back room and dumped the contents of the type cases on the floor. They threw Bordon's scant printing material through the open back door. They tossed out his small supply of paper, and one of the men started a fire and fed it with the paper as rapidly as possible.

Printer's ink went into the fire. The type cases were smashed. Bordon's battered desk and chair in the front room, his meagre files, his account books were carried out and thrown into the flames.

Then Joe Alder and his three companions smashed the hand press, kicked out the few windows in the place, wrecked it completely. They made considerable noise, but nobody came near to see what was happening. Poole and his men were on a rampage, and others kept away.

Lance Bordon's face was white as he watched the destruction of his property, but not from fear. His eyes blazed as they looked into Poole's. The muzzle of Poole's six-gun was jammed into his stomach so hard that

pain crawled up his spine.

Joe Alder and his three men came back grinning. "The job's done, Boss," Alder said to Poole.

"An' a good job!" Poole replied. "Remember, Bordon—be gone by sunrise tomorrow!"

Bordon straightened slightly as Poole lowered the muzzle of the gun from his stomach and holstered the weapon.

"You can't kill a newspaper by wrecking a press and dumping type, Poole," he said. "Don't you know that?"

"None of your lip!"

"You haven't stilled the Tonto Basin *Voice*. You've made it a little hoarse for a few minutes, maybe. But it'll be heard, Poole! You'll hear it when men run you out of the Basin and you're riding over the hill to get away, with fear gnawing at you—"

Poole hit him, then. He knocked Lance Bordon down, and kicked him, and Alder and the other three added a few kicks of their own. They left Lance Bordon stretched on the floor of his cheap office, his face cut and bloody, his hands closing and opening weakly as if trying to grasp something.

"We need a drink after this," Poole said to his men. "Hit yore saddles, and we'll ride down the street."

They swung up to their saddles and rode down to one of the saloons. Cowed men watched them through dirt-streaked windows. Behind the office of the *Voice*, the fire blazed and cracked. On the floor of the office, half-conscious, Lance Bordon struggled to sit up. He was muttering, "Can't make the *Voice* keep still!"

His half-witted helper and Lucy Beebe found him there.

CHAPTER II

The Voice Speaks Again

BORDON felt water in his face, and opened his eyes. Lucy was kneeling beside him, crying, as she bathed his bruised features. She was a tall, capable girl, range bred. Her father, Sam Beebe, owned a small ranch a mile out of Tonto City. It was so small and inconsequential that Harvey Poole had not taken the trouble to drive Beebe out.

A stronger reason, perhaps, was Lucy herself. Poole, a middle-aged bachelor, had his eyes on the girl. She could see no man but Lance Bordon. That was Poole's gripe against Bordon more than the stories in the *Voice* about his bullying methods.

"Oh, Lance!" the girl moaned. "I saw them ride past our place, and was afraid for you. I got my pony and hurried to town. They smashed and burned everything—"

"They haven't killed the *Voice*," he said.

"They've ruined you, Lance. Can't you understand? They smashed everything. And your boy—he was watching and listening. He heard Poole order you out of town. He'll have you killed if you don't go."

"You wouldn't want me to run away," Bordon said.

"But it's *hopeless*, Lance! You can't fight Harvey Poole. Nobody can. Father can't. He'd move, if he could sell out to anybody. But Poole won't buy. He—he wants us to stay here."

"Because of you," Bordon said, "That's why I'm staying, too."

"They'll kill you, Lance. That won't help us any. Go to the county seat and do something there. I'll come to you as soon as I can."

"I'm going to fight," he said.

She helped him to his feet and gave

him a drink. He leaned against the wall and looked around the wrecked office.

"Going to fight!" he repeated.

"All right, then, Lance! I'll fight beside you, whatever happens. But I don't see how—"

"He can't run me out!" Bordon broke in.

But, before daybreak the next morning, he was gone.

Lucy Beebe heard the news from a man who stopped at the Beebe ranch. Lance Bordon had thought better of it. He had saddled his pony before daylight and left Tonto City, taking the trail to the county seat.

Lucy was both glad and sorry—glad that he was out of danger, and sorry that he hadn't told her his real intentions, shared his plans with her and said a temporary farewell. She saw Poole and some of his men ride into town, watched them ride out again an hour later, shouting and laughing. They left the trail and turned toward the tumbledown Beebe ranch house.

Sam Beebe was standing in front when they rode up, and Lucy was just inside the door.

"The boy editor has sloped," Poole said, laughing. "Scared away. That's not the kind of man for yore daughter, Beebe. Mebbe she'll get over her nonsense about him now. Too fine a gal to hook up with a yellow-bellied coward."

"He's not a coward!" Lucy cried, appearing in the doorway. "It wasn't a hard job for five men with guns to wreck his place and beat him up!"

Poole's eyes glittered. "I like a gal with spunk," he observed. "Yuh'll soon forget him. He's gone, and he won't be back. I'll be droppin' in to see you in a few days."

BUT Lance Bordon did come back. He rode into town four days later after sunset with a mail sack behind his saddle, and stopped in front of Ed Welch's store. Nobody was in the street. Welch was yawning and preparing to lock up for the night.

"You?" the old storekeeper gulped. "Tarnation, Lance. They'll kill yuh for comin' back."

"Here's a sack of mail for you, Ed," Bordon said. "I had this week's issue of the *Voice* printed at the county seat. Here it is, ready for the mail, ready for you to distribute."

"They'll kill me if I do, boy."

"You're the postmaster here, and this is United States mail, Ed. You've got your duty. They can't jump you for handling the mail, or they'll be getting into trouble with Uncle Sam."

"Yeah. But Uncle Sam's a long way off, boy."

"He's closer than you think, Ed. I told my yarn to Martin Clode, the deputy United States marshal at the county seat. He won't see the mail tampered with. He'll be drifting out here in a couple of days to see about things. And he doesn't take orders from Poole."

"That won't help me any—in a couple of days."

"Where's your nerve, Ed? Tell Poole you couldn't do anything else but handle this mail."

"Poole ain't a jughead, Lance. He knows yore paper is entered as second class matter in the Tonto City postoffice. He knows I'd have the power to refuse to handle it if—well, say if there was anything in it that wasn't fit. He'd blame me for not refusin' the issue."

"Oh, I thought of that," Bordon replied. "It's not second class matter, Ed. Every paper is stamped as first class mail. I reckon you'll have to handle it now."

Ed Welch gulped and his eyes gleamed strangely.

"Yeah, I reckon so," he agreed. "What are you goin' to do?"

"Going to turn my pony into the corral and get some sleep. Don't worry any about me, Ed."

Bordon turned his pony in and went to his wrecked office. Nothing there

had been touched. His old cot was propped up in a corner, and his blankets were in an old cupboard. He made his bed and crawled in.

He was awake at the first streak of daylight, washed his face and hands at the watering trough, fed and watered his pony. A few yawning men appeared, and places of business began to open. Bordon left his wrecked office and went down the street.

The men who saw him stopped yawning and their eyes bulged. They saw a new expression in Bordon's bruised and discolored face, a new firmness in his tread. He did not look like a whipped man. And he was wearing a gun.

None of the Tonto City men could remember seeing Bordon wear a gun before. Nobody knew whether or not he could handle one. If he couldn't, going up against Harvey Poole and his men was nothing less than an invitation to be exterminated.

Bordon went to the little restaurant and ate a hearty breakfast. The elderly widow who ran the place leaned against the counter and shook her head as she watched him.

"I admire nerve, Lance, but there's a big difference between nerve and cussed foolishness," she told him. "Poole will blast you, or have you blasted. He's handled tougher men than you."

"And he'll be extra mad when he reads this week's issue of the *Voice*," Bordon said.

"How can you get the paper out, Lance. He wrecked your place. I've been up there to look. It's a shame."

"The paper's out already. You'll get your copy when you go to the postoffice. I had it printed at the county seat. The *Voice* never misses an issue."

HE WENT to the corral, saddled his pony and rode out to the Beebe place.

"Oh, Lance, you shouldn't have done it!" Lucy told him.

"It was the only thing to do," he said.

"And you're wearing a gun. I'm afraid for you! Harvey Poole and his men are experienced gunfighters."

"So am I. Never told you that, did I? I did a little lead-slinging down on the Border before I learned how to set type and came up here and turned into a newspaper editor. I know how to thumb a hammer."

"They'll put you in the wrong, Lance. They'll do something to make you draw first, then they'll have an excuse."

"I'm not that dumb," Bordon said. "I'm the one who'll have the excuse. Don't ask me questions, now. And I'd better be riding on. I don't want to get your father into trouble by hanging around here. I'll be back to see you later. If Poole comes here, tell him I stopped in and rode on."

"Where are you going?"

"Taking a little ride until certain things happen—if they do. And I'm pretty sure they will."

He rode away from the house, left the main trail and circled over the hills, jogging along, slouched to one side of the saddle like a man half-asleep. He had time to kill.

Half an hour later, a man from town burned up the trail as he passed the Beebe place and galloped on to the Broken Box.

Less than an hour after that, Harvey Poole, Joe Alder and two more Broken Box men came tearing along the trail making for town.

They pulled up in front of Ed Welch's store, in a corner of which was the postoffice. They tumbled from their saddles, tied their ponies, hitched up overalls and gunbelts, and went inside.

Ed Welch was behind his counter, and two townsmen were loafing in front of it. Welch blinked through his spectacles. Poole thrust a copy of the *Voice* at him.

"Did yuh see this, Welch?" he

roared. "It came from yore store, didn't it? You've been shuckin' them out, ain't you?"

"It didn't come from my store, Poole. It come from the postoffice," Welch pointed out. "Regular mail. Every copy of the paper addressed and stamped first class. I had to handle it same as any other mail."

"Where's Lance Bordon?"

"Dunno. Ain't seen him since last night. Some gent said he saddled up and rode out of town early this mornin'. Went to the Beebe place, mebbe."

"I'll find him and 'tend to him later," Poole said. "I gave him warnin'. And I'll 'tend to these blasted papers now."

"Hey, what's yuh goin' to do?" Ed Welch shouted, as Poole started for the back of the room with his men behind him.

"I'm goin' to burn every one of them papers!"

"Yuh can't do that, Poole! It's mail—first class mail! Destroy mail and yuh'll make yoreself liable! You'll have the government on your neck—"

"That's my business!" Poole shouted. "I won't be bothered for burnin' some newspapers that have pieces in 'em about me!"

"It's my duty to defend the mail, but I'm an old man and can't put up a fight agin' yuh and yore men, and all of yuh armed," Ed Welch said.

"That's sensible of yuh, Ed an' it lets yuh out," Poole told him.

"But it's my duty to warn yuh—"

"All right! I've been warned!"

POOLE went to the postoffice corner. He and his men ransacked the place and seized every copy of the *Voice* they could find. They dumped the papers out behind the store and touched a match to them. The townsmen kept aloof.

"Joe, stay in town with one of the men, and I'll take the other along," Poole ordered. "If Bordon shows up at the Beebe spread, I'll find him and blast him. If he comes back to town, yuh know what to do."

Joe Alder grinned.

"Oh, he'll prob'ly threaten me and then start to draw," he said.

"'Course, I'll have to defend myself. No doubt all the hombres who see it will be willin' to swear that I shot him in self defense."

"They'd better," Poole announced, glaring around.

He motioned for one of the men to follow, and went to get his pony. The pair left town in a cloud of dust, heading for the Beebe ranch.

CHAPTER III

Guns Aflame

POOLE and his man were cautious as they approached the Beebe ranchhouse. Sam Beebe was out in front mending fence, and Lucy was in the doorway. No pony could be seen, but Poole and his man were ready for violence if Lance Bordon was in ambush.

"You seen Bordon?" Poole asked Beebe.

"He stopped here for a minute right early this mornin'."

"Where'd he go?"

"He said somethin' about takin' a ride. Acted mysterious."

"We'll mysterious him!" Poole raged. "I'll get some more of my waddies an' pick up his trail. I'll run him down like I would a hydrophoby skunk, an' treat him the same when I find him!"

He clapped in the spurs and slammed away without speaking to Lucy. At his ranch, he picked up two more of his men and returned to the Beebe place. Without difficulty they found Bordon's trail, and started following it.

The trail wound over the hills in a haphazard, loose-brained fashion that made Poole curse with fury. It

made a wide sweep before turning back toward Tonto City. Poole and his men followed it slowly, with increasing irritation for in some places it was difficult to find.

Long before they came within sight of town again, Bordon had reached it.

He rode behind Welch's store, tied his pony and entered through the back door.

"Anything happen?" Bordon asked.

"Plenty." Welch told him. "Poole, Joe Alder and two Broken Box men were here. They grabbed all the copies of the *Voice* they could find, took 'em out back and burned 'em."

"Took them out of the postoffice?"

"That's right."

"That's all I need to know," Bordon said, his voice cold. "Poole finally has done it. He's reached out too far, lost his balance and toppled off the limb."

"What yuh aimin' to do, Lance?"

"Only my duty," Bordon replied.

He reached into a pocket and got out something, and fumbled at the breast of his shirt.

"Wh—what's that?" Welch gulped.

"Official badge. Special Deputy United States Marshal. Destroyin' mail is frowned on by Uncle Sam, Ed."

"Yuh——yuh're official?"

"That's right," Bordon replied. "I packed a sack of mail out here from the county seat, didn't I? Didn't have any right to handle mail unless I was official, did I? So Marshal Clode fixed me up with this badge and swore me in. I'm sworn to protect the mail and the Constitution and everything."

"I'm askin' you again, Lance—what are yuh aimin' to do?"

"Arrest the men who destroyed United States mail. If they try to resist arrest—"

"Godfrey!" Welch exclaimed. "Yuh'll be takin' on the whole Broken Box outfit. If it's like that, Lance, hit for the county seat and get Marshal Clode and some help. Don't be a dumb fool and risk everything battlin' them skunks."

"It's my job, Ed. I'm here on the spot."

"Listen to me, Lance! Joe Alder and another Broken Box man are roostin' in the Three Spot saloon right now. Poole left 'em here to lay for yuh."

"Thanks. I'll look 'em up."

Bordon tightened his gunbelt, then took his gun from its holster. He inspected it with care and put it back.

"Lance, I hate to see yuh walkin' into sure death," Welch told him. If I was a mite younger and quicker—"

"You take care of the postoffice, Ed, and remember everything that happened. If anything happens to me, see that Lucy Beebe gets my pony. He's tied out back. So long, oldtimer!"

BORDON strode through the front door and stopped beneath the wooden awning. The Three Spot saloon was across the street and a short distance to Bordon's left. A couple of men were standing on the walk in front of it and when Bordon appeared one of them darted inside quickly.

The few persons in the street disappeared as if wiped out of existence by the blast of a hurricane. In front of the store, Bordon calmly rolled a cigarette. He thumb-nailed a match and lit the smoke, took a few preliminary puffs with evident enjoyment, and tugged his hat down to fix it firmly on his head.

Knowing he was being watched through the windows of Tonto City's business establishments, he strode deliberately across the street, his boots stirring up the thick velvety dust. Reaching the walk on the opposite side, he stamped the clinging dust from his boots and started toward the Three Spot.

The other man in front of the Three spot disappeared inside. Bor-

don did not go on to the front door. There was a narrow passageway between the Three Spot and the barber's shack, and he turned into it. He went through quickly and so came to the Three Spot's back door, which stood open.

He looked in. The men in the place were back against the walls, with the exception of Joe Alder and the other Broken Box man, who stood in front of the bar, with the bartender behind it. The latter was ready to drop down out of sight. Everybody in the place was watching the front door.

Bordon tossed away the remnant of his cigarette and stepped inside. He started walking slowly toward the front. His boots squeaked, and one of the men against the wall turned and saw him, and gave a little squeak himself.

Then it was silent in the Three Spot. Joe Alder and the other Broken Box man turned quickly and saw Bordon walking slowly toward them. His arms swung loosely at his sides. His body was bent slightly forward.

Joe Alder gathered his courage. His eye took in the gun Bordon was wearing, and the badge which glittered on his breast.

"If it ain't the editor!" Joe Alder said. "Totin' a six-gun, too! And what's that thing he's got pinned to his shirt? Don't tell me he's gone and got himself 'pointed a deputy sheriff! That'd be too much fun!"

Bordon did not reply. He walked on, slowly and deliberately, his boots squeaking slightly at every step. He said nothing. His face was a mask. His attitude made Joe Alder and the other Broken Box man nervous.

But Alder and his companion made no move to whip guns out of their holsters. They had witnesses here. They wanted Bordon to make the first move, so they could claim self-defense.

Eyes gleaming, Joe Alder waited, ready to claw out his gun at the first excuse.

BORDON paced on until he was only a few feet from the pair and stopped. His arms still swung loosely at this sides. Joe Alder thought he would have to be taunted to combat.

"Sure enough, it's a tin star!" Alder said. "What jokes won't the old sheriff play next!"

Then Bordon spoke:

"It's the badge of a deputy United States marshal, Alder. I was appointed and sworn to bring a sack of mail to Tonto City. I'm calling on every man here to make a mental note of that."

"It's a tin star, anyhow," Joe Alder said. "And you're wearin' a gun."

"And know how to use it," Bordon said.

"Well, that's somethin' that'll have to be shown the gents hereabouts, maybe. They might not believe it at all."

"Alder, I've been told that you, Poole, and two Broken Box men ransacked the Tonto City postoffice and burned some of the mail."

"We sure 'nough burned all the copies we could find of that rotten rag yuh call a newspaper. Poole was right peeved. Yuh had a piece in it about what yuh called a cowardly attack on yuh and destruction of yore property. And that reminds me, Bordon! Yuh kind of hinted in that piece that I was somethin' of a yella coward, too."

"That can come later," Bordon said. "There's something else first. You've admitted that you looted a postoffice and destroyed mail—admitted it in front of witnesses. I've got plenty of other evidence even if these men lie to try to save you."

"Save me from what?" Joe Alder asked, sneering.

"I'm putting you and the man with you under arrest, Alder."

"Yuh're—what? Yuh must have a touch of the sun, Bordon. Arrest me for burnin' some rotten newspapers? Arrest me—for anything?"

"I'm warning you—and this is official—that anything you say can be used against you. Put up your hands, you two!"

"Who'll make us?" Alder howled.

Then Lance Bordon did what Joe Alder had been hoping he would do—he went for his gun.

Alder and the other man sprang away from the bar and clawed at their holsters. Alder's gun blazed a split second after Bordon's, and his slug missed. For Bordon had seen that Alder would clear leather before his henchman and had winged a bullet at him to strike him high in the shoulder.

Before Alder's gun could speak again, Bordon's flamed a second time. Alder reeled back against the bar, his body almost doubled.

The other Broken Box man managed a shot, and the slug burned across Bordon's left arm. But the Broken Box rider dropped and sprawled as Bordon's gun flamed a third time, and his gun flew out of a hand which was clawing nervously as it tried to cling to life.

Bordon sprang aside through the swirling smoke and Alder's next desperate shot missed him.

"Drop your gun, Alder!" he shouted.

Instead, Alder raised it. The two guns roared as one. Bordon felt the breath of a passing bullet on his cheek. Alder sank to the floor beside the bar, clutching at a wound in his breast.

Bordon whirled to look at the others. The men against the wall had their hands in the air. The bartender had dropped down behind his bar, and emerged now when there was no more shooting.

Bordon walked calmly down the length of the room to the open front door, and looked out. Men were running toward the Three Spot.

"Pass word for the doctor!" Bordon shouted at them. "He's needed in here—maybe."

CHAPTER IV

Singing Lead

SOMEBODY howled for the doctor, and the others kept running toward the Three Spot. Bordon stepped down into the deep dust and went across the street. He entered the store.

"Yuh're still alive!" Ed Welch said, as if he scarcely could believe it.

"I was afraid something might happen to those papers," Bordon told him, "so I printed another bunch and left 'em in a sack out the trail a piece. I'll get them now for you, so you can distribute them."

"Listen, Lance! What happened over in the Three Spot?"

"Joe Alder and his pal resisted arrest. The doctor's on his way to check them over."

"Godfrey! Yuh ain't forgettin' Harvey Poole, are yuh, Lance? Yuh'll have him an' the other men of his outfit to reckon with."

"No, I haven't forgotten Harvey Poole," Bordon replied. "I'll handle him when I get around to it."

He went out the back door, got into the saddle and loped down the south trail with a cloud of dust lifting behind him. The wondering citizens of Tonto City watched him go.

Behind him he left a stunned community. Before the town doctor got to the Three Spot, everybody around the place knew that Joe Alder was dead. The other Broken Box man was badly wounded, but the doctor said he might live, and had him moved to one of the houses for treatment.

An hour later, Harvey Poole and his three men rode into the town from the north.

There were plenty of tongues to tell Poole what had happened. He listened grimly, then strode into the store and confronted Ed Welch.

"Bordon came in here, I under-

stand, after he sneaked in the back door of the Three Spot and shot Joe Alder and Tim Crane in the back."

"I wasn't at the Three Spot, so I don't know anything about the shootin'," Welch replied. "Bordon had his pony tied behind my place, and after the shootin' he walked through the store and hit his saddle and rode."

"Run away to the county seat before I could get to town, I suppose," Poole said. "I'll get him if I have to follow him out of the state."

"He says he's a deputy United States marshal now, and that he'll arrest you men who burned some mail."

"He won't arrest nobody," Poole said. "He's been lucky so far, but his luck's run out. I'm takin' the trail after him with three men as soon as we rest and get fresh hosses. I'll get him if I have to follow him right into Marshal Clode's office!"

Poole and his men did their resting in the Three Spot. Joe Alder's body had been removed, for burial that evening in Tonto City's rocky cemetery. The doctor appeared and said that the wounded man probably would live, but would be flat on his back for some time.

The few women in town were keeping to their shacks. The men drifted along the street and talked in low tones. After Lance Bordon's display of courage, they couldn't believe he had run away. Not that they blamed him much, if he had. Meeting Joe Alder and one man had been bad enough. Meeting Harvey Poole and three more might be another story, with a different ending.

IT WAS an hour before sunset when Bordon returned to town. A rider was seen on the trail, but attracted no attention. It just happened that nobody identified him as he rode behind the row of buildings to the rear of Welch's store.

Nobody but Welch was in the store when Bordon entered and tossed down the mail sack. Everybody was out in the street or at the Three Spot.

"Here's the other bunch of *Voices*," Bordon said.

"Listen, Lance! Poole and three of his gunnies are in town. They're plannin' to take the trail after yuh."

"I'll save them the trouble," Bordon said.

"Four men, Lance—four! Poole is a wicked hombre with a gun. The three with him are old hands of the Broken Box, and probably all killers. Have sense!"

Bordon touched the badge on his breast and looked Welch straight in the eyes.

"Better unlock this sack and get the mail in the boxes," he suggested.

"Don't be a fool!" the old storekeeper raged. "Don't crowd yore luck. Yuh've done enough to show what yuh're made of. It's right yuh should have help now. If yuh go lookin' for trouble with that bunch—"

"I'm not on the prod for Harvey Poole on account of what he did to me and my property," Bordon explained. "I'm an officer arresting him for destroying mail. What man was with him when he looted the post-office—besides Joe Alder and the one I shot?"

"Luke Doane."

"Thanks, Ed. Poole and Doane are the men I'm after, then."

"And there's a couple more Broken Box men with 'em, don't forget."

"I want to borrow an extra gun, Ed, and buy a box of shells."

Bordon put money on the counter, and Welch gave him the shells. Then the old storekeeper glanced at the front window to be sure nobody was watching, and got an old six-gun from beneath the counter and handed it across.

"She throws a mite to the left, Lance," he warned.

Some passerby glanced through the window and saw Bordon stuffing the extra gun into his belt. He hurried down the street to the Three Spot. His news should be good for a free

drink, he judged.

"Lance Bordon's back in town," he announced. He's in Ed Welch's store right now."

Harvey Poole was sitting at a table against the wall. He sprang to his feet and slipped his holster around where he wanted it, and motioned for Luke Doane and his other two men to come to him.

"Let Bordon make the first move," he whispered. I'll stay here. One of you get down the street and the other up. Luke, you loaf in front of the barber shop."

The three men hurried outside. Poole walked to the bar and bought a drink for the man who had brought the news of Bordon's presence in town, and took one himself. Then he went back to the table and sat beside it again, fumbling with a deck of greasy cards.

Lance Bordon left the store through the rear door, and walked behind the buildings until he came to the blacksmith shop. There, he went down the alley and peered around the corner of the building to look into the street. He spotted Luke Doane in front of the barber shop, and saw the other two Broken Box men, but could not see Harvey Poole.

Some rider coming to town went by with a rush, his pony's heels kicking up a cloud of dust. Bordon passed through the dust cloud behind the rider and got to the opposite side of the street unseen. He slid down the opposite alley and went behind the ramshackle buildings toward the Three Spot.

He did not make the mistake of underestimating Poole. He had heard that Poole had plenty of courage and was a good lead-slinger. He also knew that Poole was absolutely unscrupulous and would resort to any means to gain his ends.

HE PEERED through a dirty rear window of the Three Spot and saw Poole sitting beside the table against the wall and watching the front door. Only three other men were in the place, including the bartender. The others had filtered into the street and into the other buildings, thinking the battle would be out there, and that Poole would become engaged in it only if his men needed help.

Bordon hitched his holster around toward the front a little and strode into the Three Spot through the rear door, as he had done before. He had eyes only for Poole. He did not fear the bartender or either of the two men in the room before the bar.

"I've come for you, Poole," Bordon said.

Poole roared an oath and sprang to his feet and whirled. He did not make the mistake of reaching toward his holster. He saw Bordon standing just inside the back door with his thumbs hooked into his belt. Poole bent forward and put the palms of his hands flat on the table.

"So it's you!" Poole said. "Yuh blasted Joe Alder and another of my boys, I understand. We'll have a little settlement for that, Bordon."

"You're under arrest for destroying United States mail!"

"So I'm under arrest? Yuh think yuh can take me?"

"You know what to expect, if you resist."

"Mebbe two can play at that game, too," Poole snarled.

Bordon started walking slowly across the room toward the table, and Poole did not move. Not a sound came from the others in the room. Somebody out in the street was shouting, but Bordon did not hear the words. His attention was concentrated on Poole.

"Keep yore distance, Bordon!" Poole barked.

"I'm coming for you, Poole. I'd rather have you alive. But it's up to you how I take you."

"Pretty sure of yoreself, ain't yuh?"

"Pretty sure," Bordon said.

He continued his deliberate advance.

"I'm warnin' you, Bordon—"

Bordon's boots squeaked again as he took another step. Poole gave a roar of rage, sprang aside and clawed for his holster.

Bordon had a little ill luck then. His gun caught leather and hampered his draw. Poole's weapon roared, and as the dart of flame and swirl of smoke came from its muzzle Bordon felt a blow in his left shoulder.

He had been hit, he knew. But his own gun was working now. Poole had tipped the heavy table over, and was behind it, trying for a shot around the end. Bordon hurled himself forward as he fired. Poole's second bullet brushed his hip, and Bordon's return fire tore into the table top.

Bordon crashed against the table as Poole sprang to his feet and jumped away. Their two guns roared at the same instant. Half-dazed, Bordon emptied his weapon at Poole as the master of the Broken Box rushed toward him.

Six feet away, Poole tottered and sprawled.

Bordon ran for the rear door and dashed through it, stuffing shells into his gun. Welch's weapon was still in his belt, unused. Bordon knew his shoulder wound was bleeding badly, and that weakness might come upon him quickly. And this was not a time for him to be weak.

Men were howling out in the street and boots were pounding the walks as men ran toward the Three Spot. Bordon darted through the space between the saloon and the barber shop and went to the front.

He was in time to see Luke Doane run into the Three Spot. The other two Broken Box men were dashing toward the saloon also. Bordon had no quarrel with them, unless they opened up with their guns. They had not participated in the raid on the postoffice. But he did want Luke Doane.

CHAPTER V

The Voice Still Speaks

HE kept back out of sight. He could hear men shouting in the Three Spot. Luke Doane's bellowing voice was demanding to know where Bordon had gone and threatening vengeance.

Bordon stepped out on the walk and took up a position in front of the barber shop. Men who saw him scattered away from his vicinity. He watched the end of the narrow passage between the two buildings. If Luke Doane had rushed out the back door of the saloon, he might make for the street through that passage, as Bordon had done.

That was just what Luke Doane did. He came boiling out of the passage and happened to look in the wrong direction first.

"I want you, Doane! You're under arrest!" Bordon barked.

Luke Doane whirled, gun in hand, and opened fire. Bordon's gun barked reply and Luke Doane went down. The other two Broken Box men came charging out of the Three Spot, as Bordon had expected they might.

Bordon stumbled across the walk and got into the middle of the street. The two Broken Box men darted to right and left as they saw him, and opened fire. It seemed to Bordon that the gun explosions and the wild howls of men were far away. The scene was swimming before his eyes.

He realized dimly that he was shooting. He knew when the hammer of his own gun clicked on an empty shell, and he jerked Ed Welch's old weapon out of his belt. In that dim moment when his senses were starting to disintegrate, he remembered Welch's injunction:

"She throws a mite to the left."

Then, Bordon realized that he was down on one knee in the deep dust,

then on both knees, and that spurts of dust were flying around him as bullets struck, and that it was getting into his nostrils and mouth and almost strangling him. Either dust or blood —he was not sure which.

He worked Welch's gun, seeing his targets as through a haze. Dimly, he realized that horses were pounding toward him, and heard a commanding voice shouting to somebody. The gun hammer clicked, and Bordon fumbled in his belt for shells. But his fingers seemed numb. With all that roaring in his ears, he could not tell whether anybody was shooting.

He felt himself swaying forward. Then the dust was in his mouth and nostrils again, which was to be expected, since he had sprawled face downward in it.

The roaring was still in his ears as consciousness returned to him. But now it was a din of voices. Before he opened his eyes, he heard Lucy's voice, and her father's, and the doctor's and Ed Welch's, and another he finally recognized as that of United States Marshal Martin Clode.

"Don't take on so, Lucy," the doctor was saying. "He'll be all right. That shoulder wound—shucks, I've healed hundreds worse'n that. It's loss of blood made him pass out. He wouldn't stop after he was shot, but went galivantin' on to clean up the others——"

"Got to thinkin' he might bore into serious trouble, so I deputized five men and came ridin'," Marshal Clode was saying. "But Bordon was just finishin' the clean-up when we rode in. He didn't need any help, seems like."

"How about the others?" Bordon heard Sam Beebe ask.

"Poole ain't hurt badly at all, and he's the marshal's prisoner," the doctor said. "Luke Doane's dyin'. The other two will live."

"Poole oughta be strung up!" somebody said.

"That's enough of that talk," Clode warned. "We won't have any necktie

[*Turn page*]

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party. Bordon will have some ideas about Poole. In fact, he told 'em to me in the county seat. Poole could be sent to prison for destroyin' mail, even if it was only newspapers, 'cause they were stamped. But that wouldn't give Bordon his printin' plant back. And he yearns to run his paper."

BORDON decided that now, since he knew how everything stood, he might as well become really conscious. He opened his eyes. He heard Lucy Beebe's glad cry as moist lips touched his cheek and tears splashed upon it.

"Oh, Lance!" she cried.

"I'm all right," he said. "Help me up!"

They helped him up from the floor and put hnm into an old easy chair Ed Welch had. He saw that his shirt had been cut away from his shoulder, and what hadn't been cut away wasn't a pretty sight.

"Give me a new shirt, Welch," Bordon ordered. "And take the women folks away till I can get it on over these bandages. My work's not done."

Within half an hour, he looked halfway decent, and had been braced with whisky and hot soup off Welch's store stove. His legs were a little wabbly when he got up, but he puffed a cigarette a few times and announced he was all right. Then Clode took him to the barber shop, where Harvey Poole was being held a prisoner.

"Poole, yuh're facin' a long term in prison, if Bordon wants to press charges against yuh," the marshal said. "Yuh've made a bad play and got beat, and the wisest thing would be to admit it. There's been trouble enough, seems to me."

"What's the deal?" Poole asked.

"For my part, yuh'll go a mite easy hereafter tryin' to run the business of everybody in Tonto Basin," the marshal said. "Maybe the *Voice* won't say harsh things about yuh, if yuh do that. And yuh'll not annoy the Beebes."

"All right," Poole grumbled.

"Now it's Bordon's turn," Clode concluded.

"Poole," Bordon said, "you made a remark that when we need a newspaper in Tonto Basin you'll buy an outfit, hire an editor and run one. We'll change that a little. You'll buy me an outfit, and a dandy one, and have it freighted in. You'll have a building built for me. I'll run the *Voice*, Poole, and you'll have a third interest for footing the bill."

"I will like—"

"Or go to a federal prison," Bordon went on. "I've got an order all written out for press and type and everything I need. And a paper to your bank in the county seat, which you'll sign. It tells the banker to have the stuff rushed and to pay for it—"

"All right," Poole interrupted, scowling. "I know when I'm licked. Abruptly, he grinned. "Allus did want to be in the newspaper business."

"Yuh're gettin' off easy, Poole," the marshal warned him. "Men have been

[*Turn page*]

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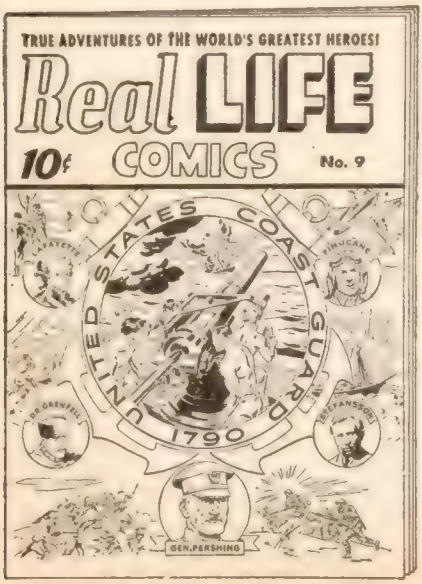

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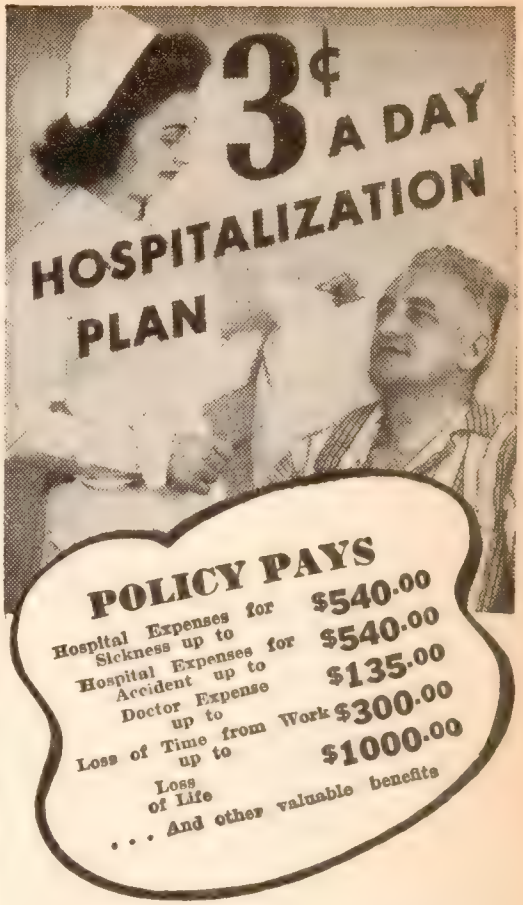
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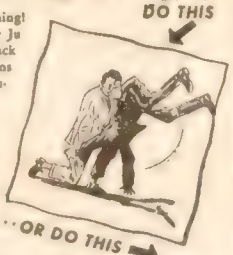

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killed and hurt on account of this mess. I'm tellin' yuh here and now that yuh're on probation as far as I'm concerned. I'll crack down on yuh any time I hear yuh're not behavin' yourself. Sign those papers, and I'll have one of my men start for the county seat with 'em, and release you from custody. But I'll stay here in Tonto City myself until the dust settles."

So, the following day, Bordon's half-witted boy helper had the most exciting time of his life as he watched three men cleaning up the debris in the newspaper office, and heard them talking about the new equipment which was coming, and the new building which was to be built as soon as possible.

And he looked on as Lance Bordon and Lucy Beebe stood in front and watched two men tacking up a new sign, which read:

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THE SHERIFF LENDS A HAND

(Continued from page 88)

"We got to keep Pa from findin' out 'bout Brady," he said.

"What about Brady?" asked Kip Reed.

"That bandage what was on his shoulder was a fake. He wasn't wounded. Last night, in the dark, John Ellery missed him, altogether."

"What!" exclaimed Kip Reed.

"It's true as shootin', Kip. I examined the body."

The sheriff whistled and reflected for a moment.

"Tell the coroner not to mention it to Pa."

"Yeah." Brown's big hand came up, holding the whisky glass.

"Rye," he announced. "On the house."

"Thanks," said Sheriff Kip Reed.

He gulped down the delayed drink. Then, he relaxed and thought how happy Ma Ellery would be.

TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 12)

sidered or called absolute wildcat territory (meaning that there was no oil production within miles). He got his rig set up and then sold the cottage to get money with which to pay his drillers, sold his home, but still continued to live there as a renter.

He drilled to about 2800 feet, and while the log of his well looked good, and he was more hopeful than ever of striking oil, he was out of funds and could go no further without money.

Galbreath got on the train and went to Oklahoma City and to his old partner Charlie Colcord, who was very wealthy, and begged him for a loan with which to complete the well. He offered Charlie an interest in the well and all the leases he had tied up in the vicinity, but Colcord refused the interest and said, "Bob, I have no faith in your drilling, you always drill dry holes, but just for old times' sake, because you were my partner, and was always square, I am going to loan you enough money to complete this well. If you bring in a dry hole, just forget you ever borrowed it, if you bring in the biggest gusher in the world, just pay me back what I am loaning you, and I hope for your sake that you do bring in a big well."

Bob had, when he left home to seek the loan, taken all the available cash in the

[*Turn page*]

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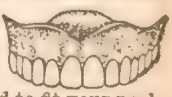

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house for railroad fare and expenses, and while he was in Oklahoma City his wife sent their little daughter to the butcher shop with a note asking for twenty-five cents worth of round steak. The butcher took the note, wrote on the back of it that he could not extend further credit until something was paid on the already overdue account, and handed it back to the little girl to take back to her mother.

At Last—Success!

Supplied with more funds the drilling was resumed the next day, and four days later Bob Galbreath brought in one of the biggest oil gushers ever known to that part of the country, was practically a millionaire overnight and could buy the butcher's entire outfit with his pocket change. There have been millions made in oil in and around where Bob Galbreath drilled that well, because it was the discovery well of the great Glenn Pool Oil Field.

Glenn Pool, like other oil or gold strikes, attracted the usual crowd of people, yet being only a few miles from Tulsa and Sapulpa, two larger towns, its population did not increase as rapidly as some of the other oil towns, and it did not draw as many of the lawless element because the men worked in the oil fields by day or night and during their off shift time looked for their pleasure and sprees in the larger towns. The big gambling games took place in the larger towns, but a lot of the money that went into the chips that were passed across the gambling tables was money from the Glenn Pool oil field.

Other oil prospectors decided that they could do what Bob Galbreath had done. They tried other wildcat territory, some of them to spend their last dime drilling nonproducing wells or dry holes, others to strike it rich and bring in gushers of the black gold, but it is doubtful if any of them followed the elusive fortunes of the oil game as long and as relentlessly in the face of bitter disappointments as did Bob Galbreath.

Rich Indians

There were, however, enough successful drillers and operators to widen the Glenn Pool field, to bring in other fields. Soon Oklahoma had become a state which was oil-mad. Big oil men, who were destined to become much bigger, moved in, men like Frank B. Ufer and Harry F. Sinclair, great oil companies, like the Texas Company, were on the ground and operating, and the Indians collecting a one-eighth royalty on all the oil produced on their lands in addition to, in some cases, fabulous prices paid for leases, grew rich.

It was then that many of the better educated Indians began moving into the larger towns, and buying nice homes. Others followed suit, until there were many rich Indians who came in and bought homes costing thousands of dollars, homes that were already built and furnished almost like palaces. Many squaws and papooses whose last home before moving into the palatial

town home had been a wigwam or wickiup, might be found in the midst of costly furniture sitting upon the floor, not readily understanding just what the big upholstered chairs and lounges were to be used for.

Joy Riding

The Indians of the oil region had lots of money and they really put it in circulation. From the very start of their wealth they went for the gas buggies, and soon any Indian of means deemed a highpowered automobile an absolute necessity.

The kind of cars the Indians liked best were those that sold for from three thousand to near four thousand dollars, and there was one instance where an Indian in company of which he knew his squaw would disapprove, in the midst of a joy ride, wrecked his car. He went to a nearby telephone, called the auto dealer and ascertained that the dealer had another car of the same make and color. He ordered the car sent to him immediately, paid for it, leaving the not badly wrecked car where it was, and driving home in his duplicate car so that the squaw would not know anything about the joy ride.

Another Indian I knew owned a five story office building that had been built from his oil royalties in little more than a year. He had a swell automobile that he had learned to drive, but knew nothing of its mechanism. On his way down town one morning, the motor quit and he could not get it to run again. He spent a few minutes pressing this and that button, twisting this and that screw, and when the motor failed to respond to his tinkering, he calmly gave the car to a passerby, ordered a taxi, proceeded to his office and phoned his auto dealer for a new car.

While oil in Oklahoma made many rich, it spoiled much of the scenic beauty, especially along streams where the refuse oil and overflow from oil wells found its way into the stream. This so polluted them that the fish died, made the water of the streams unfit for use, and in many cases the oil upon the surface would become ignited and burn the timber along the streams.

Combating Oil Fires

One watching a party fighting an oil fire on a stream might at first think they were crazy, on account of the method used, these fires usually occurring away from any pressure hydrants. The best method to combat the flames was to throw rocks into the burning mass of oil floating upon the water and so churn up the water and at the same time break the scum of oil that the blaze was extinguished.

An oil well on fire is a very spectacular conflagration, especially at night, and it is also a very hot place to be around and not without its dangers. The shooting of an oil well is also a thrilling sight, and there are those who have been around the oil fields for a number of years and just never happened to be present when the shooting

[*Turn Page*]

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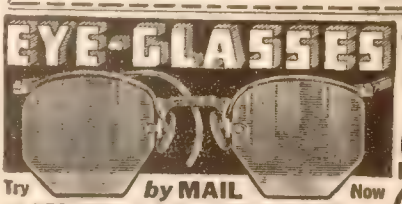

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of a well took place. Few people who have never seen a well shot know how it is done.

Well Shooting

The shooting of oil wells occurs after the well has been drilled in, but on account of possibly a small flow of gas which is insufficient to blow the well in as a big producer, the shooting is deemed necessary and is done in order to open up a large cavity at the bottom of the well so that the oil may better flow into this underground reservoir in greater quantities.

Well shooters like to have the well or hole as near full of water as possible in order that there will be plenty of pressure at the bottom. Long cans of about six inches in diameter and containing anywhere from about ninety to five hundred quarts of nitroglycerine are lowered to the bottom of the well and to these cans are attached a wire which will convey an electric current causing a spark to ignite the nitro.

The well being anywhere from around three thousand feet to a mile deep, filled or half filled with water, this makes for enormous pressure at the bottom. When the well shooter, from a battery plunger some distance from the well, touches off the charge, he begins running as fast as possible, taking with him his end of the wire, and in that way saves practically all of his wire.

When a charge of nitro is exploded in a well, there is not an immediate eruption from the well as one might expect. There is a rumble, a trembling of the earth, and the rumble continues sometimes for two or three minutes while the great charge of explosives is tearing out a great hole or cavity deep in the earth.

That pressure from the explosion is, of course, seeking a way out, and finally strikes the eight inch hole which is the well, and then from the mouth of the well gushes oil, water, mud and rocks. A great volume of this material that filled the space at the bottom of the well, which at this stage of the operation may be a cavity as big as a house, is thrown hundreds of feet into the air. It's a great sight.

Many Philanthropists

Not all the wealth of Oklahoma oil was pushed across gambling tables. Some of it was used for high and noble purposes. Not all the men in the oil game were ruffians, in fact as a class they were very philanthropic, always generous, because they were a class of men who might be wealthy today and broke tomorrow, or broke today and wealthy tomorrow.

Charlie Page, the great philanthropist and founder of the town of Sand Springs, had among his great oil holdings a 160 acre lease at Taneha, about twelve miles from the first Bob Galbreath well. Page set aside all the profits from this one lease for the maintenance of his own private orphans' home, in which at times he housed and cared for more than a hundred orphans, and when it came time for this great oil

man to pass on to the great beyond, he saw to it that the home for those orphans then there and for those to follow would be maintained throughout the years.

Taneha Goldie

Within almost a stone's throw of Charlie Page's Orphans' home oil lease lived one of the oil field's most unique feminine characters, "Taneha Goldie." She was the Calamity Jane of the rough and tumble oil town.

She drank her whiskey straight, rolled her own and smoked when and where she pleased. She stood six feet and two inches and weighed 189 pounds, she was as hard as nails and could sock like Jack Dempsey in his heydey. She perhaps whipped more men than any tool dresser in the field. She would loan or give any hungry man her last quarter to eat on, but would knock one's block off if she caught them cheating at gambling or in any other way. Goldie's motto was, "Play the game square."

Once she entered a two-room oil-field shack where a woman lay desperately ill and half starved while her no-account husband and friends of his own class gambled and drank in the adjoining room.

Goldie bodily pitched out the men, then tenderly set about administering to the sick woman, procuring food and medicine, even clean bed linens from her own shack. And she did not stop there, she nursed and looked after the patient until she was well on the road to recovery.

Oil fields have come and gone, and they will come and go again, but the memory of characters like Bob Galbreath, Charlie Page and even Taneha Goldie will live for a long time!

Adios.

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

DUSK is falling across the Arizona badlands when the Masked Rider and his faithful Indian companion, Blue Hawk, tired after a long day in the saddle, are aroused by the sharp clatter of gunfire. Racing to the top of a ridge they see a stagecoach surrounded by a band of masked renegades, pumping lead into the figures of the driver and shotgun guard.

Rushing down the slope, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk plunge into the fight. Vainly the outlaws rally their forces for a charge against the Masked Rider as he takes refuge behind some rocks, but the terrible accuracy of his fire drives them back, forces them to flee.

However, even though they risk death from his chattering guns, they make certain to take all their dead and wounded with them before galloping off into the badlands, heading toward the flat reaches of the desert visible from the higher ridge.

That attempted stage raid—only one of many stage hold-ups and cattle thefts by a powerful organization of owlhooters—forms the opening incident in a deadly campaign of cleverly-organized lawlessness which challenges all of the Masked Rider's

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STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933, of Masked Rider Western Magazine, published bi-monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1942. State of New York, County of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and County aforesaid, personally appeared H. L. Herbert, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Masked Rider Western Magazine, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business manager are: Publisher, Better Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y.; Editor, G. B. Farnum, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor, none; Business Manager, H. L. Herbert, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. 2. That the owners are: Better Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y.; N. L. Pines, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company, but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders, who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds or other securities than as so stated by him. H. L. Herbert, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 9th day of October, 1942. Eugene Wechsler, Notary Public. My commission expires March 30, 1943.

courage and cunning and miraculous gun wizardry to smash.

Because danger has ever ridden at his side and because of his silent vow to help the oppressed and down-trodden and fight against all outlaws, the Masked Rider plunges into the heart of a baffling sequence of swiftly-paced events which make BULLET HARVEST FOR RENEGADES, by Charles N. Heckelmann, the book-length novel in the next issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN, a tremendously exciting story.

Adopting the role of Wayne Morgan, a wandering cowpuncher, the Masked Rider takes the stagecoach into the town of Malpais where no one seems surprised at the raid, but everyone *is* amazed at Morgan's story that the Masked Rider's timely intervention prevented the outlaws from getting a valuable shipment of currency contained in the boot.

In Malpais, Wayne Morgan learns that the outlaws have been terrorizing the county for weeks and all attempts to capture them have failed. The few times when battles had resulted between cowpunchers and outlaws and any of the latter were killed, the outlaws carried off their dead so they could not be identified.

Also, every time the renegades are trailed all sign ends at the edge of the desert—and there is nothing out in that hot, sand-covered waste but Desert Acre, a bleak, forbidding prison.

Feeling runs high in town after the announcement of the raid as Morgan meets Dan Roark and his young partner in the stageline, Harry Marvin. Trouble is barely averted when Dave Gerard, wealthy rancher, accuses Marvin of being behind the raids, stating that the raids started shortly after Marvin's arrival in Malpais.

Marvin, in turn, who also runs a cattle ranch, accuses Gerard of being the guilty one, calling him a range hog. The situation is complicated by Marvin's being in love with Gerard's daughter, Mary, who has been forbidden by her father to have anything to do with Marvin.

Morgan subsequently takes a job as shotgun guard on the stageline and is wounded and knocked out in another raid. But this time the outlaws leave one of their dead behind—a convict known to be serving a sentence in the prison out in the middle of the desert.

A sudden wild idea leaps into Morgan's brain that since all attempts to locate the outlaw hideout have failed, it might just be possible that, with the aid of crooked guards and unknown to the warden and other officials, the renegades might somehow be using the prison as their base of operations.

He concocts a daring plan with the sheriff to masquerade as an outlaw from another state, pull a fake raid on the stage office, have himself captured by the sheriff and sentenced to Desert Acre to follow out his strange hunch. But in the midst of the holdup someone fires at Dan Roark from the alley and the old man drops dead.

And this happens immediately after Roark has sent word to the sheriff that he

has important news for him. What that news was remains a mystery.

Morgan is captured as he chases after the unknown killer, and in the confusion a clerk from the stage office accuses Morgan of the murder. The crowd is in a mood for a hanging and for a time Morgan believes he has come to the end of his long trail. Only the strong resolution of the sheriff, and his steady gun, save Morgan.

Despite the unexpected shooting of Dan Roark, Wayne Morgan elects to follow through on his plan and is sentenced to twenty years in prison as he refuses to let the sheriff testify in his behalf.

The sheriff and a deputy take Morgan to the prison, where he meets Warden Ott Henry, a powerful man with a fierce hatred for law-breakers. Morgan, masquerading as a desperate outlaw, Hod Purling, finds himself relegated to a section of the prison set aside for only the worst criminals.

What happens after Wayne Morgan gets inside the drab prison walls forms a tense, gripping sequence of events. From that moment BULLET HARVEST FOR RENEGADES moves to a breath-taking climax filled with surprises as Wayne Morgan finds himself in one of the most perilous situations of his career.

Even he is not wholly prepared for the subsequent destructive blows struck by the outlaws, for the startling revelations of what men are involved in that gigantic web of lawlessness!

In addition to the book-length novel featuring the Masked Rider the next issue will contain a fast-action novelet and a host of thrilling short stories of the Old West. And don't forget our old friend, Foghorn Clancy. He'll be back to entertain you readers with some more entertaining TRAIL TALK.

All you readers who have any opinions to air about our magazine or the stories it contains, don't hesitate to write in. Please address your letters to The Editor, MASKED RIDER WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y.

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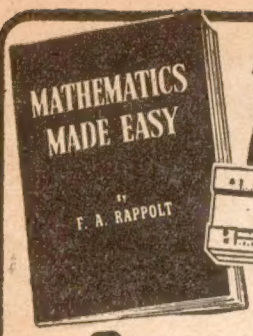

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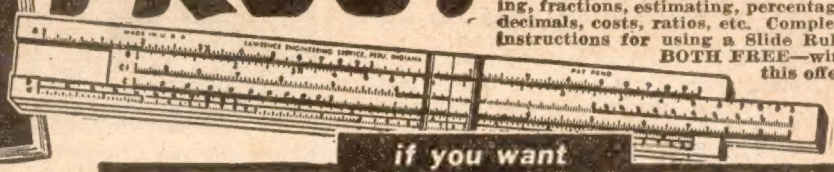

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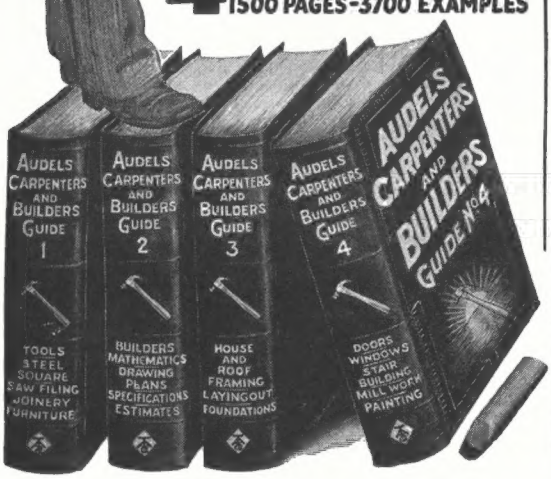
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You'll want *SPEE-D-HONE* the moment you see it and try it . . . not because it costs so little . . . only 10c . . but because it enables you to enjoy dozens of clean, comfortable quick shaves from one razor blade.

Yes, *SPEE-D-HONE* is small, compact, easy to carry, mail and use. Takes only a few seconds before every shave to keep that razor blade in first-class condition.

Men tell us they've had as many as 50, 75 and 100 clean, cool shaves from one blade. That's ECONOMY for you . . . saves finest cutlery STEEL for war effort.

And don't overlook the women, either. Tell your wife or sweetheart about *SPEE-D-HONE*. She'll know why . . . and want one right away.

Simple, complete instructions for use on every *SPEE-D-HONE*. But the important thing is to get *SPEE-D-HONE* from your dealer now. Only 10c for months of the best shaving you've ever had.

Only **10¢** Each at Your Dealer's

LOOK For THIS DISPLAY at YOUR DEALER'S TODAY!

If your dealer can't supply you, send 10c together with 3c, to cover postage and handling, for each *SPEE-D-HONE* desired (offer expires June 30, 1943) to Department TG

CURTISS CANDY CO. (distr.), CHICAGO, ILL.

★ *Mail SPEE-D-HONE to the boys in service. They'll appreciate one. Use at least a half dozen for this purpose. Specially carded for easy mailing.*

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